

SURREAL GROTESQUE

ISSUE 9



TWISTED LOVE

Steve Santoro
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Table of Contents

Delighting in a Corpse by Jennifer Moore.....	5
Anthemis by Guadalupe Canale.....	9
Faun by Trebor Healey, A Review by Courtney Alsop.....	11
Resident Evil 6: Review by Courtney Alsop.....	12
Antiseptic Horsemouth by Mark Slade.....	15
The Man Who loved Bigfoot: An Interview with Eric S. Brown.....	19
Heartless by BC Jackson.....	23
Staring into the Abyss by Richard Thomas, A Review by Garret Davis.....	31
Interview with a Madman: William Malmberg speaks, An Interview by Jeremy Maddux.....	35
The Handicap Stall by O.D. Hegre.....	41
Dimension by Matt Denniss.....	47

Pros and Cons of Being a Disembodied Head by Mark Grzywacz.....	53
Inside the Vortex:	
A Gallery by Vizioner.....	64
The White Blanket by Stephen Burger.....	68
The Becoming by Brent Abell.....	77
The Perfect Home by Joseph J. Patchen.....	83
My Perfect Darkness by Tiffany Pennywell.....	89
Transed-Oceanic by Michael C. Keith.....	93
The River Gives Life By Christopher Boyle.....	98
Off the Grid by Devvon Dettra.....	103
In Sickness and in Health by Sean M. Thompson.....	109
The Boy Brigade by Chris Daruns.....	113
The Evil That Men Do, Part 8 by Kay Mallory.....	119
Special Thanks and Credits.....	126

Happy Twisted Valentine's Day from your editor,
Daniel W. Gonzales!



Delighting in a Corpse

By Jennifer Moore

The crack and pop of scratches on a record quietly hisses out save the last dance for me by the Drifters. Her shoulders sway left to right as she peels charred flesh from my cheek and holds it up between her polished fingernails. She turns it over back to front inspecting the busted blisters and black crispy ends. The slice of skin is now a salt and vinegar chip posed at her purple lips, the color of bruises or grapes. They part to welcome the crunchy wafer. Pearls of an oyster bite into my flesh, carbon staining their ridges. She holds it there, nibbling on it as if it were a piece of aged cheese; all she's missing is a glass of Merlot perched in the other hand. I can't feel the tug of cells breaking free as she collects more of my burnt flesh. Gingerly, she places it all into a Tupperware container.

I feel nerves awaken as she runs a cool gel over my bare legs and torso. Electrons fire under her practiced hands. Thousands of needles pierce the soles of my feet, and then something warm and wet caresses my toes each receiving equal attention. When she finishes her ritual, everything tingles; an icy breeze envelopes my body. Nerve endings spark and my raw flesh prickles with tiny bumps. She leans over me, blinking past false lashes with all of her pearl teeth exposed. Her mouth is wide and reeks of cabbage. She places its gaping hole over my nose. Her lips clamp down in a tender hold. Deep blue veins run along her cheekbones, the mapping of a lost river. Her eyes close as she relishes the taste of my skin.

She releases me only to return with yards of gauze. My legs are pulled one by one from the table as she wraps them carefully. She takes great care to lift my hips to cover them in bandages. At my chest she pauses to place a hand on each breast. She squeezes them and frowns. She drops her hands to continue the task of wrapping my body like a mummy. My neck and face are left free of bondage. Threads of my red hair fall to the floor as the shear of scissors whispers in my ear. Metal drops on metal and she runs her hands through what is left above my ears.

A labored tug pulls me from the table. The reflection of a stranger wrapped in bandages stares back at me from across the room. The woman is standing beside her, holding her up, brushing bits of hair from her emotionless face. She turns and faces her with that wide mouth full of pearls.

"You look gorgeous, don't worry about a thing. I know now he will take you back."

Love is in the air...Or is that Blood?



He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not..





Anthemis

Guadalupe Canale

She loved him so much she
could draw blood from his
wrists only by wishing that
somehow the world was set on fire,
yes, pain pain pain death
and them both dancing on their tombstones,
she loved him with this
crazy passion of those who
don't know how to love like
good christians or like
good creatures that evolved from
fowl, oh, she was willing to tear his lips from
Him to keep them as a keepsake
keep him close keep him bound,
keep him forever young forever hers
She loved him with this crazy passion
that was insanity ornamented
with lithe arabesques just like
veins or bare lungs, like the world
opening like a onedayflower like
the love she had for him, that was
so maimed so marred so brutal
so perfect, so true so damn
human, so damn human,
so damn unprecedented that
it would be unfair to judge,
Who knows how to love properly anyway
she wasn't even mad maybe
maybe it was just this thing she had for life,
that she wanted to bite the world until it bled,
until it all became crimson and she loved him so much
that she closed her eyes and smelt the
boiling liquid through her veins as well as his
oh, love, this incitation to lunar worshipping,
this, this frenzy of a mind behind closed doors,
This private shame,
love, she is all of us and we as well as she
can't tell
love
from lust
from nightfall or ecstasy or a field of camomiles;
from the point of no return once you me he she've crossed the gate of Ishtar.

BluestWaves (bluestwaves.deviantart.com)



Faun by Trebor Healey:

A Review by Courtney Alsop



Puberty is a time in life adults generally remember and cringe. Unfortunately for Gilberto Rubio, puberty has hit him harder than any sex education class could have prepared him for. At 15, he has the body and facial hair of a man, plus more. His legs are so thick and woolly with coarse hair he tries to shave them. He becomes so endowed his pants can't contain his erection. Little nubs begin to grow out of his head, and his ears are pointed. Sitting on anything but couches is uncomfortable because of an embarrassing tail. And of course...his feet are turning into hooves.

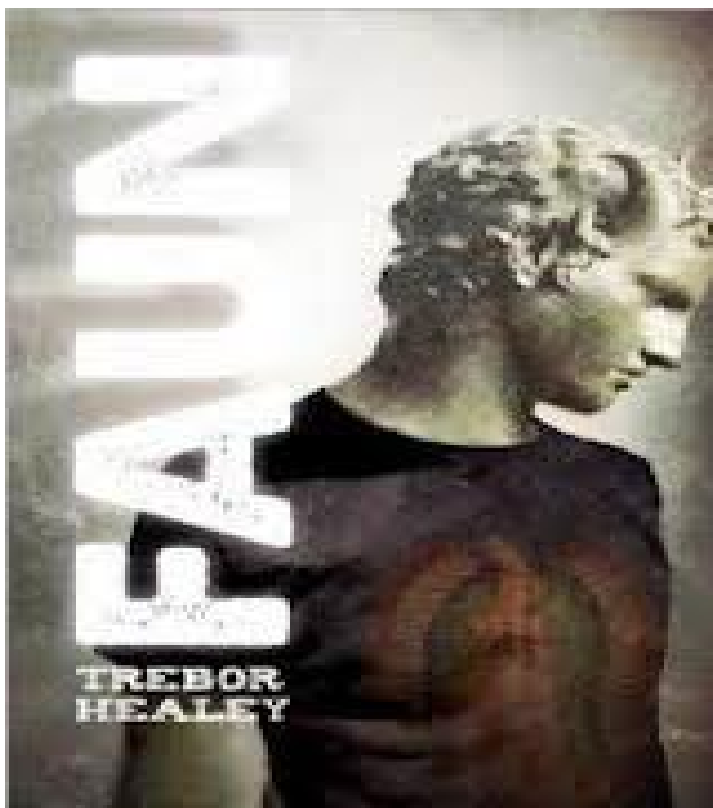
Gil is turning into a faun, but he doesn't know it. Rumours circulate that he is a chupacabra, and wonders if it might be true. There is no way that he can ask his mother to explain why he

has demonesque horns growing from his head. Instead, he searches the internet, and meets someone in a chat room who may hold the answers that he needs. He needs to find him, as everyone breaks out in spontaneous orgies when he is around. Even his mother begins to feel attracted to him.

Faun is a strangely erotic urban fantasy with a mix of Mexican culture in L.A., Catholicism, and Greek mythology. Sexuality, gender, social issues, religion-this book has it all. Foremost, it is a story about growing up "differently" in society, and how one can view and handle differences among people. Gil is looking for acceptance and answers amid religions and cultures that shun non-conformists and outsiders.

What really strikes me about this book is how much detail the characters are given. The first part of the book is about Gil's mother, Lupita, and Gil's childhood. Yes, it is before his major transformation in his teen years, and yes, some readers might get antsy waiting for the "faun" part to happen. To me, the details regarding Lupita's marriage, Gil's conception, and their home life in a Latino community are informative and interesting. The world that Healey builds is vivid. The beginning of the story is told from Lupita's perspective, then Gil's, and then other characters get their parts. The different perspectives, with the contrasts in atmosphere and tone, makes this story varied and reminds us that the world has different cultures and communities within it that are vastly different from one another.

In my opinion, finding a well-written male protagonist in YA fiction is difficult. Hell, finding



Resident Evil 6:

A Review by Courtney Alsop

Because the concept of a zombie virus outbreak never gets old, we have the newest installment of the Resident Evil series. Resident Evil 6 was released in October 2012 and was released for the Xbox 360 and PS3, with the PC version scheduled for release in March 2013. It's hard to incorrectly guess the story for this RE game. The C-Virus, the newest bioterrorist zombifying virus, has been introduced to the world and it must be stopped.

What this game offers is multi-character perspectives. The player has four story campaigns to choose from: Leon's, Chris's, Jake's, and Ada's. Each main character has a partner who can be controlled by the AI or another player. The AI is decent in combat, though they sometimes hang back when you need them. Leon's partner is Secret Service agent Helena, Chris has his BSAA teammate Piers, Jake has government agent Sherry, and Ada has an unnamed agent that was thrown in with a patch to make her campaign two-player. Everyone has different motivations behind their actions: duty, money, family, revenge, or orders, and I found each campaign to be enjoyable for the story content.

Each campaign has nearly identical gameplay with very few exceptions. Weapons found, secondary weapons, and physical abilities differ according to character. The camera is fixed over-the-shoulder. In addition to your firearms you can use a melee attack that can damage enemies or destroy objects. The combat is decent for this kind of game, and each

an "ok" male protagonist is sometimes few and far between. While I've never been a male, I think Healey gets it so unbelievably right. He is looking for acceptance for what he is, even though he doesn't have the proper words for what is happening. The sexual identity issues he faces are common and I appreciate how the author writes the way that a 15-year-old handles it.

Honestly, the only problem I have with this book is that I found the resolution of the conflict between his parents to be weak. For such a long time it is a simple fact that Lupita's husband abandoned her, and suddenly he pops into the story. Towards the end of the book, Lupita's story dies out, when it was once exciting and involved. Fortunately, Lupita and her estranged husband are not the focus of the book. Gil's story did not disappoint me. It is beyond the now standard fare of the teen who turns into a vampire, werewolf, mermaid, etc. I highly recommend this book to YA and adult readers alike, and especially to male readers who are interested in urban fantasy.



campaign is peppered with quick time events. The beginning of Leon's campaign has the creepy atmosphere of slowly working your way through a campus. After this, you're on a zombie killing rampage in an action movie. You mow through hoards of zombies with your arsenal of weapons, create massive explosions every five minutes, fly on (and fly) multiple aircrafts, and drive motorcycles over helicopters.

The worst part of the game for me are the events that require you to run away from some kind of impending doom, and you must run *towards* the camera, avoiding obstacles that you cannot anticipate. This occurs enough for it to be a chore. And Leon's hair makes him look like a singer in an emo boy band. There is no manual, a stupid trend for games, especially if the games do not have a decent tutorial system. Resident Evil 6 allows the player to acquire skill points and unlock upgrades, such as an increase in firearm damage and melee damage. This will feel a little too RPG for some people, but the ridiculously high amount of skill points that you need to level up the abilities makes upgrading a rare event. For example, I played through Leon's and Jake's

campaigns and I still had not broken past the second level for any three skills. The prologue and Leon's story do not intersect perfectly. When you do Leon's campaign you will notice some differences at the end, including not carrying an injured Helena and the helicopter does not shoot at you. A novel cannot fail to "mesh" correctly, and this should not be overlooked in a video game either. It is bad storytelling that must be avoided.

If you want to be genuinely scared, go play something else. The quick time events keep you on your toes, like struggling to accomplish an event before a creature shoves your head into a meat grinder. The monster designs were decent, there are a few jump scares that might get you, but nothing that will keep you up at night. The old Resident Evils, real examples of survival horror, will not be coming back. Action games make more money and they are more widely accessible to audiences. RE6 is highly enjoyable when you want to shoot zombies, look badass, and have a relatively easy time doing it.



ANTISEPTIC HORSEMOUTH

BY MARK SLADE

I was driving north on the Holly Hills 440, a piece of highway no one hardly travels when I looked over at a dizzy teased up blond in a 1988 station wagon. Her face looked like a floor mat for truckers. And immediately I was attracted to her.

Some years ago a Senator Freeman passed a bill that everyone in America had to undergo plastic surgery to beautify their faces. No Uglies in America was the slogan. If you did not comply, you were sent away to be examined by doctors in a mental home. And if you still didn't comply, you were treated as an enemy of the state.

Well, a few years have passed since that law was finally amended. Senator Freeman died in a horrible train wreck, his face disfigured. Before his accident, someone had the guts to force him out of the Senate. All who have been persecuted have been given payment for such personal liberty taken from them.

So the Uglies have been popping up all over the place, according to the news. I personally have not seen any until that moment on the Interstate. I felt a tug in my pants. I saw that she was leaving the Interstate by exit 12. Excitedly, I followed her. She headed to the City Rapid Crown and stopped at a hotel bar near the airport.

I stopped at the bar too. And I was real glad at the time. I was so hyped for that Ugly, I nearly exploded.

I watched her from afar, sitting at the table in the back sipping Gin. I watched her with a group of friends, three guys and a brunette with droopy eyes. I was hot for her too. But that blond, she tore something inside me. The guys were a bit strange looking. One had ears you could land a 747 on. Another had a face like gorilla's. The third guy had tiny eyes on flat, long face and a long slim nose that hung down to his mouth.

What a group they were. It was fascinating to see Uglies act as if they were normal. Now a days, we Norms have to treat them as equals. I don't know how to feel about them. You see, my mother told me when I was a kid I was an Ugly. She didn't want me to be singled out as a weirdo. So she sent me to the doctors to fix my face. Since then, my life has been

nothing but easy.

I ordered a Sam Adams ginger-pink beer and ambled over to the tables where the Ugliers sat. I slid a chair noisily across the tavern floor to sit next to the blond. The conversation went dead cold. They stared at me, exchanged uneasy glances with each other.

“So,” I said, blowing out air. “How is everyone?”

No one spoke.

I continued. “I’m fine. By the way, my name is Tim Richmond.” I touched the hand of the blond briefly. She removed her hand, scooted her chair away from me. “What’s your name?” I leered at her.

She didn’t speak. None of them did. Instead, they rose from their chairs, one by one, nodded to each other. The brunette led the blond by the hand and went to the exit of the tavern. The men followed. The blond stopped at the automatic door, stood at the threshold. She gave a tug of a smile.

They were gone.

I couldn’t give up. All I could think of was that special rope I had in the trunk of my car. The thought of tying her up with that vinyl cord, watching the knotted strands cut into the flesh of her naked ankles and wrists. That special handkerchief my mother gave me, gagging her, stifling screams as I forced myself on her.

I couldn’t give up.

It had been too long since I had bed an Ugly in that special way.

I jumped from my chair, abandoning my ginger-pink beer. I rushed out the automatic door to catch the gang. I saw her getting in her 1988 station wagon. I had to have her, even if it was by forceful abduction. Oooooooooooooo. I felt a pang in my heart and a tug in my crotch. I raced to her car., I was half way there, I felt something had come across the base of my skull. Everything went black.

I awoke, blurry eyed, groggy. I saw the outline of people surrounding me. I smelled cigarette smoke and heard loud music blaring. There was laughter, chatter among the blurry shapes. There was the putrid smell of antiseptic like in hospital rooms.

I tried to move and found that I was bound by something that was cutting into my ankles and wrists. Little by little, my vision cleared up. But not completely.

My face hurt immensely. It was stinging something

terrible, felt like a drug was wearing off. My eyes focused more. I saw the blond in a corner with ten or so people, drinking, talking, having a grand time. She was wearing a small tight-fitting black cocktail dress. She was leaning down, showing the man whose lap she was sitting on, all of her cleavage and much more.

God, it was loud in there. The bass from the stereo penetrated my throbbing ears.

My vision cleared up completely. A man dressed as a surgeon removed his mask and smiled like a badly drawn horse, buckteeth protruded large purple lips. He held a bloody scalpel in his right hand and a needle and thread in his left.

I screamed.

The room grew quiet. The smoke from the cigarettes choked me. I coughed, and a stabbing pain drifted in and out of my face. There was a large oval-shaped mirror looming over top of me.

I saw my face. My cheek bone still hanging out, was lower than my right eye, which now had been shaved of an eyelid. My lips were thinner, raised up in a permanent smile to show large dentures that were much too big for my mouth.

The room was filled high pitched laughter as I continued to exercise my vocal cords with screams.



<http://joshuadobson.deviantart.com/>



The Man Who Loved Bigfoot:

An Interview with Eric S. Brown



1. So for someone who had never read your work, what would you say to them your writing is about? How would you describe the Bigfoot Wars?

ESB: I write all kinds of stuff but I seem to be best known for Bigfoot horror and zombie stuff. I rewrote H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds into a zombie apocalypse tale for Simon and Schuster. Bigfoot War is kind of like a zombie apocalypse book just with bigger, faster, far stronger monsters. The concept of the first book in the Bigfoot War series is that one little town in North Carolina ends up being attacked by a huge tribe of Sasquatch and the sheriff and her duties must try to save as many people as they can from the beasts. By the second book, the dead have started to rise and the zombie apocalypse has begun on top of the war between beast and man.

2. Where does your Bigfoot obsession come from?

ESB: After eight years of writing zombie books like Season of Rot, World War of the Dead, etc. I wanted to write something different. I wrote Bigfoot War and it exploded in the indie world and got great reviews from everywhere from Rue Morgue to Chizine to The Horror Fiction Review. It also raked up over 100 five star reviews on Amazon and was for a time the best rated Bigfoot book on both Amazon and Amazon UK. The response to it was so overwhelming, it became a series and I am still writing Bigfoot War books now. The sixth book, Bigfoot War: Outbreak, was just released and I have plans to write a 7th later this year if my other projects allow me the time.

3. What do you think of the film, "Harry and the Hendersons"?

ESB: I remember seeing it as a kid but that's all. I don't even remember if I liked it or not.

4. How much of a hardcore zombie fan are you? What are some of your favorite zombie films?

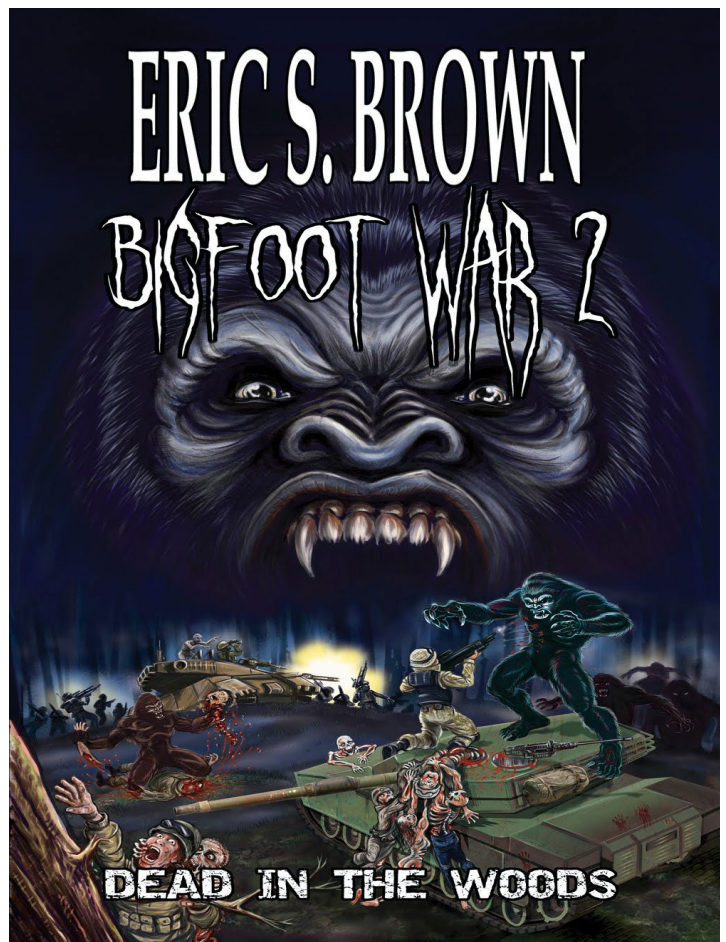
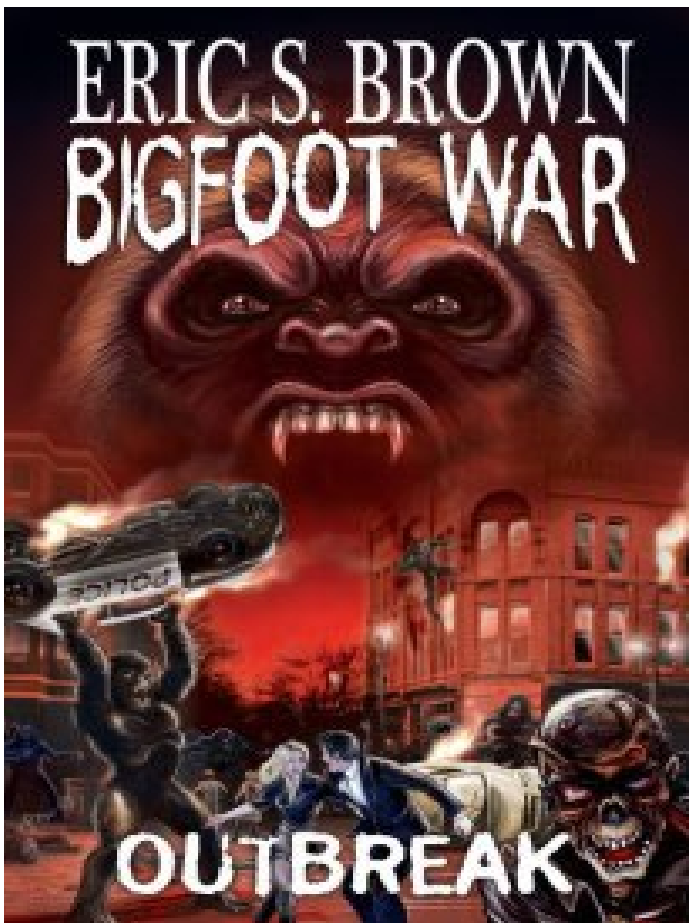
ESB: I used to be a really, really hardcore Z fan but these days I have lost touch some with the genre in terms of film. My favorite two Z films of all time are Dawn of the Dead and its remake.

5. Where do you think the legend of Bigfoot emerged from originally?

ESB: I kind of think they're real and the legends came from people encountering them.

6. Do you think Sasquatch generally get a bad rap?

ESB: In terms of horror, totally. Most folks believe Sasquatch to be peaceful and in real life I sure hope they are but they also make great monsters. They're really scary if you think



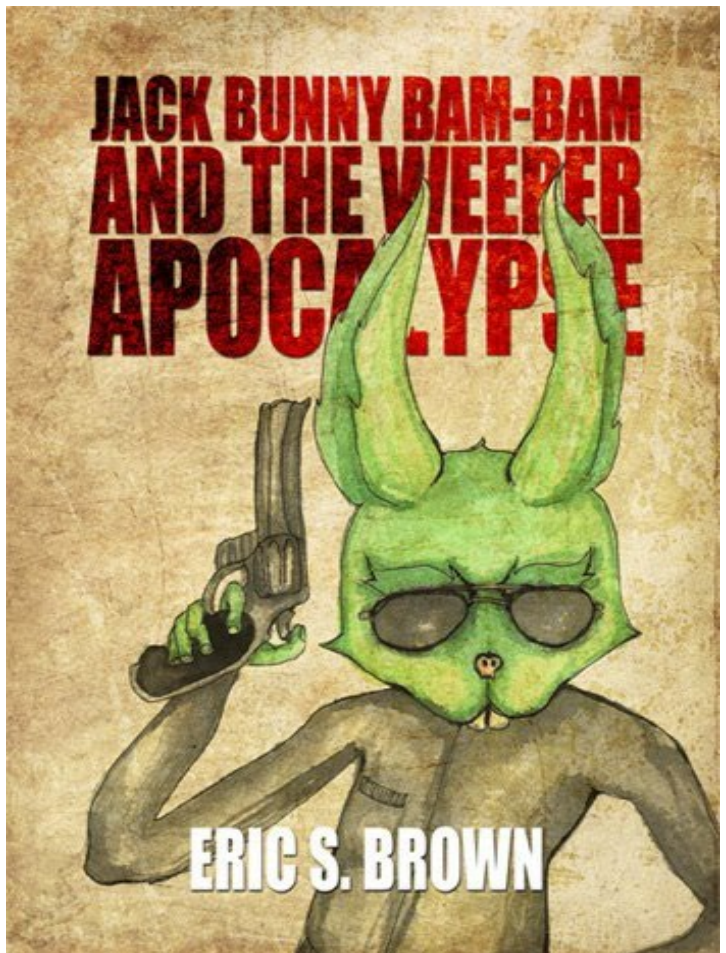
about what they could do to you if you met them in the woods and they were ticked off.

7. If you were to meet a Bigfoot in real life, what would you say to him?

ESB: I think I would either be running or hoping I had a really high-powered weapon with me.

8. What future projects are you working on?

ESB: I just finished up writing Jack Bunny Bam-Bam and the Weeper Apocalypse for Bizarro Pulp Press. It's a Bizarro genre book about a green rabbit hitman in a very strange future world who finds himself facing his world's equivalent of a zombie apocalypse. Currently I am scripting the superhero comic book series The Storm Chasers for Unstoppable Comics (my arc on the title starts with issue 10 later this year) and awaiting the release of the collected hardcover edition of my A Pack of Wolves series from Grand Mal Press.







Heartless

by BC Jackson

It was raining. Jennifer flipped up her hood as soon as she got out of her car. Well, not her car but the car she had been driving for two days straight. The car where she had clipped the picture to the visor so she could look at it as she drove. The car she had stolen from a dead man.

She had spent half an hour holding that picture, studying the faces in it, before she finally quit procrastinating. There was nothing in that picture for her. Not yet.

She ran across the street, keeping her head down. Anyone who saw her would have thought she was a teenager, though she hadn't been for almost two decades. She was still about the same size though; petite and skinny. It had worked to her advantage over the past week.

Jennifer ran up the driveway of a nice Mediterranean style house with a BMW in the drive. There was a light on in the window by the front door. She turned the opposite direction and went around to the back of the house where there were no lights; just a faint glow from the basement windows.

She went to the back door. There was an awning above it that kept the rain from hitting above her shoulders. She flipped her hood back and glanced around. There was a privacy fence and enough bushes and ornamental trees to keep any neighbors from seeing the backyard; to keep anyone from seeing her. Privacy comes with a price.

She reached out for the knob and stopped. Her hand was shaking. She was breathing hard, too hard for the short jog across the street. Her legs began to feel weak and her vision became a little blurry. She felt her chest tighten as her diaphragm pressed against her lungs. She felt like she may pass out. This happened every time. It was the point of no return. Jennifer's body knew that if she went through that door, she would go through with the whole thing. She had done it four times in seven days. Each time her body had put up a fight, each one with a little more spunk than the last. Each time it had failed to stop her.

Jennifer closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. This is what you want. As her breathing slowed she shook her arms out to her sides. This is what you need. She squatted down on her haunches and put her head between her knees. This is what you have to do for them. She rose up and breathed in deep. As she let all the air out of her lungs, she smiled. This is what you do for love.

Jennifer reached a steady hand out and tried the door knob. It was locked. She reached in her right jacket pocket and pulled out a chromed .38 revolver. She hefted it in her hand, finding comfort in its weight. With her nerves as hard as the steel of her gun, she went through the door.

Just how she went through the door was a well-choreographed series of events that she had become surprisingly good at in just a week. She used the heel of the revolver to break the door glass in the corner, she reached in with fanned out fingers and found the lock, twisted it, and slipped inside. It took less than 10 seconds.

The stairs to the basement were to her right. She wasted no time bounding down them two at a time toward the flickering glow at the bottom. Halfway down, she heard the sounds of Michael Bublé playing softly and had the fleeting feeling of descending into hell.

At the bottom of the stairs she found herself standing behind a couch, looking at a room full of candles surrounding a nicely stacked fire in a stone fireplace. On the floor between that and the couch were two naked bodies trying very hard to become one, but failing miserably. He was too hairy and weather-worn next to her smooth, unblemished skin. And he was way too sweaty for her to be enjoying any of it. He was trying though, God bless him.

Jennifer watched for a moment, partly because she had expected them to notice her as soon as she appeared and partly because it was such a forced scene that it was almost funny.

This is not love.

Jennifer raised her gun and pointed it at the stereo across the room. She fired two shots. The first one broke

off the face plate but did not stop the music. It did stop the monkeys making love in the floor though as the girl jumped up screaming and the man fell on his side with a comically confused look on his face. The second shot shut the music down.

The girl, a blonde with perky tits who couldn't possibly have been old enough to drink, just stood there with her arms held akimbo, her body fully exposed, and her eyes clamped tightly shut while screaming so loud it actually drowned out the ringing in Jennifer's ears. Just one more reason not to like her. The man made a move to get up but she stopped him when he was on his knees by pointing the revolver at his chest. She looked into his eyes. He recognized her.

"Hello, Richard," she said. "Will you please shut her up?"

He reached out and touched the blonde girl's hand, which she immediately pulled away. She did stop screaming but she refused to open her eyes. She just stood there shaking, whimpering, and squeezing her eyes tight. She was not going to cooperate. Jennifer swung the gun toward the blonde and pulled the trigger. Richard yelled something, but it was drowned out by the gunshot. The girl finally opened her eyes but there was only life in them for a split second. The new hole in her chest, right between her perky tits, didn't even have time to bleed before she collapsed into a heap on the floor. Now it was Richard who began to scream.

Jennifer leapt over the couch and delivered a kick to his face. He fell backwards and hit his head on the stone fireplace. He was out cold. If not for the odd angle of his neck, he would have looked like he was just sleeping. She had seen him sleep once or twice before, albeit a much younger version. She had also seen him naked before. In fact he was the first boy she had ever seen that way. He had also been then first boy to see her naked. The first to enter her. The first to say he loved her.

Jennifer found a workshop in the back room with a workbench on wheels. It was a little short for Richard but it would do. With much effort she managed to get him up on the table on his back. He had helped

her a little, not knowing what was going on in his groggy, semiconscious state. He didn't come around fully until she was tightening the last strap around his body. "What the fuck?" He groaned, flexing and pushing against the restraints. Jennifer smiled; it had been the first thing they all said when they woke up this way. "It's been a long time, Richard," she said. She was standing behind him, out of sight. "It seems your tastes haven't changed with your age."

"You're fucking crazy, you know that?" He was starting to cry again. "Why did you kill her? What did she ever do to you?"

"Quit your blubbering." She said flatly, stepping to his side so he could see her. "You didn't care about her. You're incapable of caring about anyone but yourself." "What the fuck are you talking about?" He shouted. "I loved her! I loved her with all my fucking heart! Why are you doing this to me?"

"And we're back to you, aren't we, Richard? See how fast you did that?" She pulled out her knife. "Tell me, did you already take hers? How many girls have you robbed since you took mine all those years ago?"

Richard looked confused, but he was working it out. Jennifer let him.

"Took your..." He laid his head back and searched the tiled ceiling for answers. "What did I take from you? I don't remember. It was so long ago. But you can have it back, just tell me what it is. I'll find it. I'll--"

Jennifer shook her head and studied the dancing flames in the blade she held above his chest. He didn't get it. "What? What?!" He screamed. "Jesus, Jenny, I don't..." When he called her Jenny she raked the tip of the knife across his cheek so fast he didn't even have time to flinch. He screamed profanities as blood flowed down his cheek and pooled on the workbench. The cut was deep. "You don't get to call me that anymore," she said, her face less than an inch from his. "That is what my husband calls me and because of you, because of what you stole from me, I can't give him what he deserves."

Richard's eyes lit up, like a literal light bulb had just switched on in his brain. "Your virginity? Is that what you're talking about? Jesus Christ, Je-" he caught himself. "Jesus, that was mutual. It was both our first

times."

"No, Richard," she said, standing up straight. "You took something much more valuable, and I know it was you. I have only been with five other men in my life, my husband included. All of them I thought I loved, but I didn't."

She pulled the picture from her pocket and held it in front of his face. He studied the faces, a man and a child of no more than two years old. He didn't recognize them.

"I knew it was one of you bastards who took from me what belongs to them." She looked at the picture. Still nothing. "That's my husband, Ben. And that's my son, Robbie."

"They're- they're very cute," Richard said, squirming.

"Yes they are." She put the picture away. "But I don't love them. How could a mother not love her own son? Or the husband that came inside her to make him? I am not a monster! I want to love them! I want to love them with all my heart."

She was shaking again, losing control. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and recited her mantra again. You are doing this for them.

She opened her eyes and was calm. Richard, on the other hand, was a complete fucking mess. He looked more scared than ever, tears were streaming from his eyes, and from the odor she could presume he had just pissed himself. She didn't look to confirm, though.

"I couldn't love them with all my heart, though, could I?" She asked calmly. "Because someone had stolen my heart. I already checked the others, Richard. I slit open their chests, cracked their ribs back, and watched their hearts beat their last. None of them had it though. They had only one heart each. So it has to be you."

Richard began shaking his head wildly, trying to tell her no, to tell her to stop, but it all came out in a sputtering mumble even he couldn't understand. She put the tip of the blade to his chest, up where it met with his neck. She leaned in as she pressed the

blade in, drawing his blood with it for the second time that night.

“This is going to hurt,” she whispered.

Richard was a little thicker skinned than the others. Jennifer had to use a lot of pressure to ride her blade down his sternum. She worked fast, moving through another series of well-choreographed moves with surprising ease. She slit him down to the middle of his stomach, careful not to go deep enough to kill him. He passed out when she reached under his skin and pulled it apart, separating it from his muscle and bone. She flipped her knife over and used the serrated edge to saw quickly through his ribs down one side of his sternum and then she reached inside him, grabbed hold of those bones, and pulled just as she had done with his skin. She reached into the cavity and moved his lungs aside, just in time to see his heart sputter its last few beats, and dug her fingers around his heart, feeling.

Nothing.

She grabbed hold of the limp muscle and pulled. The aorta offered little resistance and little blood; he was already dead. There was nothing else behind it. Just pooling blood and curled up sinew.

She dropped his heart back into the hole with a splash and staggered backwards. Her legs hit the couch and her knees buckled. She let them. She landed softly on the couch, staring at the fire.

I’m not a monster, she thought. Her eyes drifted to the blonde on the floor; her body ever trying to lead her.

Am I?

She took the picture out of her pocket one more time, smearing blood all over it. She tried to clean the faces off but only managed to cover them with more blood. Finally she rubbed it against her chest, wiping the blood on her hoodie. She looked at the faces. She wanted to feel something. She wanted to love them. She felt nothing.

She dropped the picture and hung her head on her chest. Her eyes went to the newly smeared blood. Her fingers curled around the knife she hadn’t even been aware she was holding. Her body was trying to tell her something

again. Her body thought it had the right answer.

“Go ahead,” she said, unzipping her sweatshirt. She tore the tank top underneath down the middle. She wasn’t wearing a bra. “Just make it quick.”

Jennifer was aware of her arms moving, of the knife pressed into her skin, but she tried to block it out. She needed to stay conscious if she wanted to find out.

This is what you want. The knife was down to her belly and the pain was manageable.

This is what you need. Her fingers dug under and ripped the skin from her bones. She tried to ignore the searing pain and fought the darkness flooding the edges of her vision.

This is what you have to do for them. There was no sawing. Instead, her hand reached up under her ribcage. This would be done by feel.

This is what you do for love. Her hand moved past her lungs-

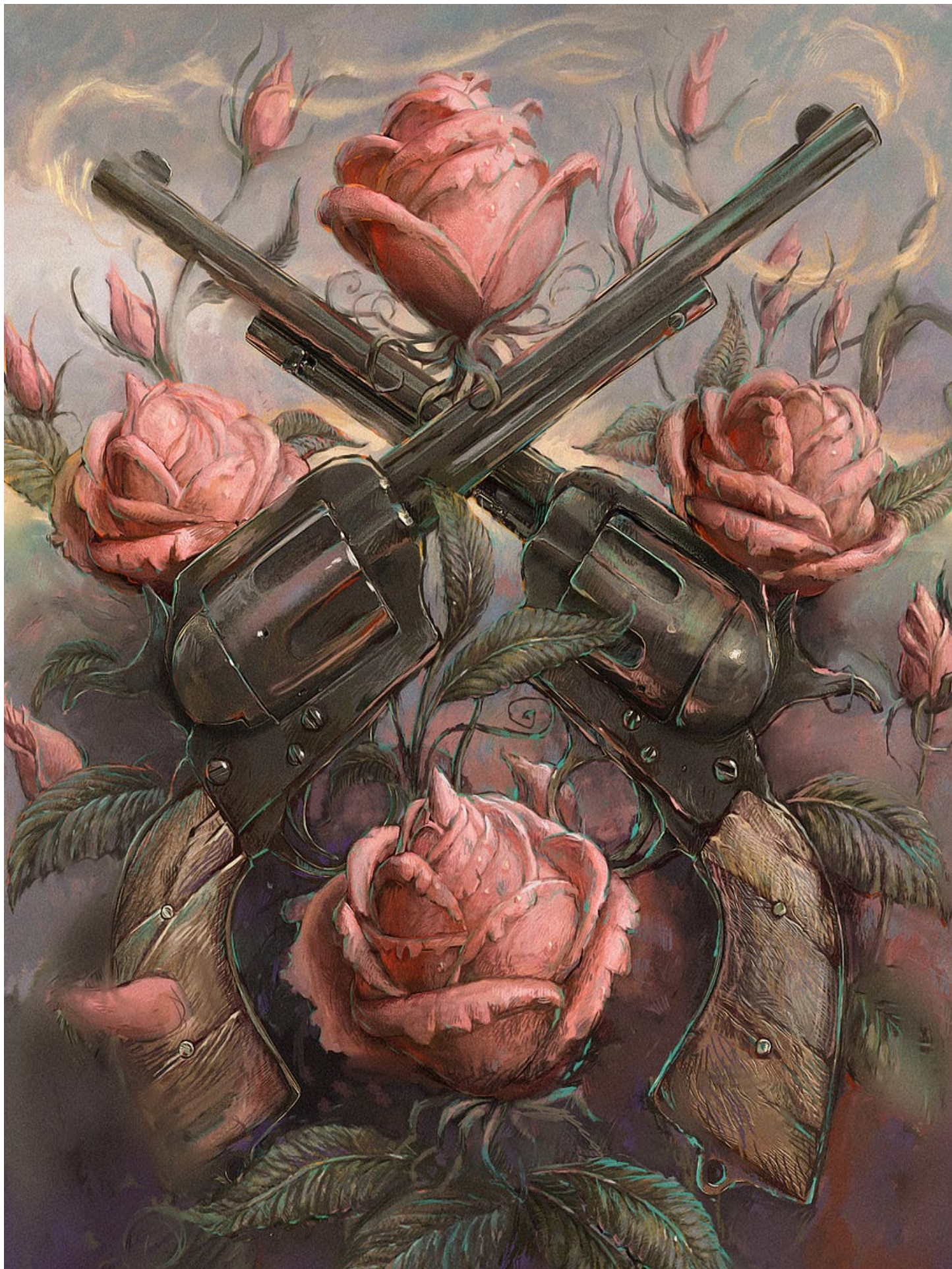


Conspiracy Theory



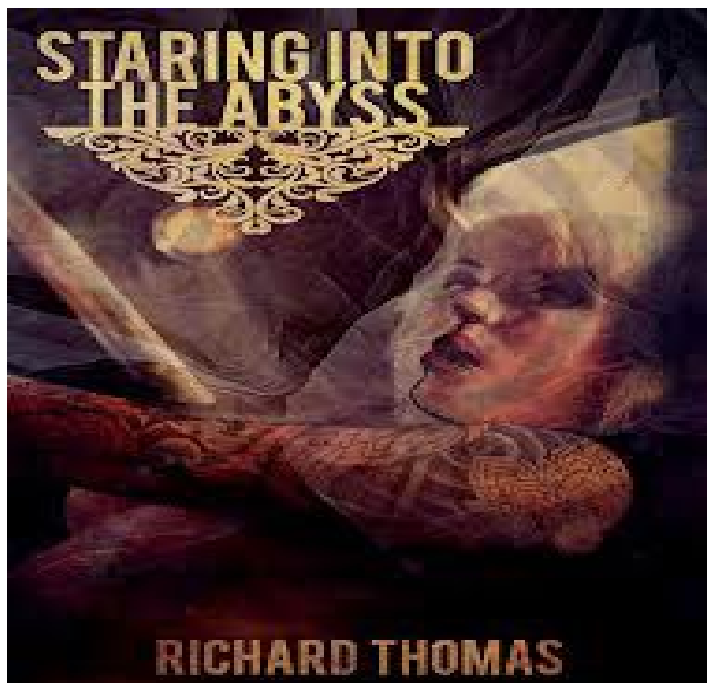


morbido13



Staring into the Abyss by Richard Thomas

A Review by Garrett Davis



Staring into the Abyss is a collection of twenty dark and gritty psychological tales by Richard Thomas. Full to bursting with sex, sorrow and violence, Staring into the Abyss is perfect for those with a penchant for the underbelly of society. Opening with a story called Maker of Flight, Thomas, shows his knack for establishing atmosphere, immersing the reader in a damp, foul aired, windowless chamber where a gnarled man named Isaac resides. Like it or not Isaacs home is one of the nicer places the reader will visit. Whether or not they have any desire to be in the shady and often soiled environments Thomas plunks them in is a matter of preference as readers might feel the need to shower after reading.

Isaac sits in his tower cell day in and out, hunched over a workbench making

mechanical birds while sipping orange juice. This strange detail makes him an all the more intriguing character. It was a strong start. But Maker of Flight just ends with little explanation as to why he was making the birds leaving a dissatisfied feeling but also a yearning for more.

Isaac is one of the more memorable characters you come across in Staring into the Abyss. This can be attributed to the length and similarity of some the stories. Many characters just didn't have enough time to introduce themselves properly and because of the themed content of the collection they could be easily mistaken for the protagonist say three tales back. It becomes somewhat of a morbid mad-lib: This is (Insert Name) it's a tough time in their lives. They often (Drink/ Do Drugs/ or other form of self-abuse) too much. And this is their attempt to make it better.

The worst offenders for this are the female characters, all of whose descriptions are based on what they wear, usually skin tight clothing with a sideways mention as to what kind of underwear they have on. This is not strange apparel in this day and age but cropped up enough to be notable. Don't let the bad apple spoil the pie though; Staring into the Abyss has enough high points to balance out the lows.

One such high point is the largest story in the collection called Victimized. The premise of which is that the judicial system finally seems to have enough of its self-

imposed red tape and has made it legal for the victim of a crime, let's say, a rape, to challenge their offender in life or death underground boxing match. What a good idea! What will it take to make this happen? Enter Annabelle, a rape victim by day and murderer by night. She frequents this boxing ring preparing for the day when she will take on her offender. Another regular of the ring is her love interest Michael who's stands in for the no shows and the weak. It easy to like Mike despite his supporting role probably because he's one of the truly decent people met in 'the Abyss'.

Splintered is something unique and worth mention all on its own. Thomas actually wrote a choose your own adventure piece for adults. This is not like the old Goosebumps book, although it may produce them. Readers will find themselves actively making choices through the last stages of a doomed relationship. By changing the format so drastically Thomas conveys a sense of playfulness to the reader, who might be more inclined to put the misery of the prior stories behind them and actively take part in ending the relationship for the better or remaining whipped.

Along with this two other stories stick out amidst the rest: Paying Up and Stephen King Ate My Brain. Paying up follows a man at a strip bar after a hard day's work, not the most out of the ordinary experience among the previous stories, however the end is very satisfying and demands an 'Aww' that will make you question yourself . While Stephan King Ate My Brain.....well it does exactly what it promises, depicting Mr. King trading eating the brains of his victims (Hannibal Lector style) in exchange for a bestselling novel.

Staring Into the Abyss by Richard Thomas boasts some rich atmosphere and interesting ideas but falls loses some of its intrigue in the shorter stories where character and plot are hard pressed for time. Ultimately

it is up to the reader to decide what they like in Staring into the Abyss because there is something for everyone.



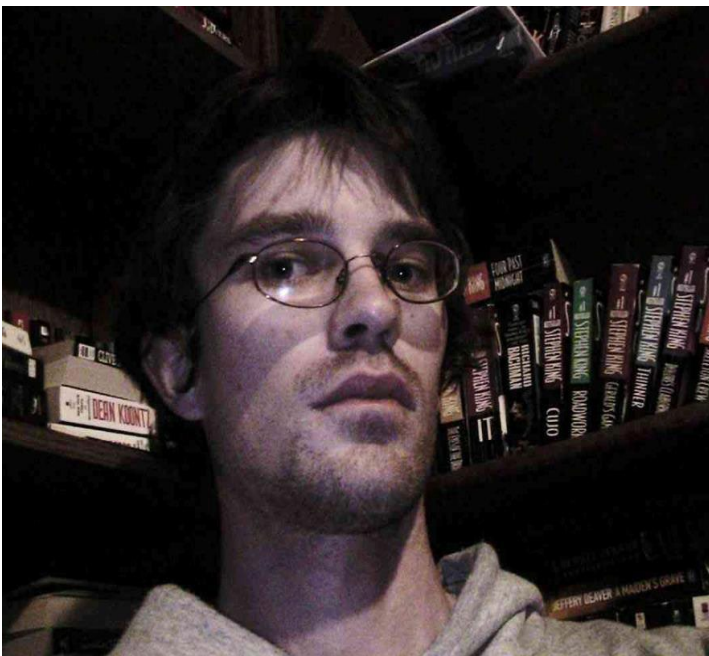
WILLIAM MALMBORG

JIMMY



Now on sale for Kindle on Amazon.

Interview with a Madman: William Malmborg speaks



Interview by Jeremy Maddux

Contributor to Surreal Grotesque

Impulse – A sudden urge or desire.

It motivates some to be a positive force in the world, others to commit violent and hostile acts. It drives every individual working in an artistic medium to create.

Repulse – To drive back or repel.

Impulse sets forces in motion. Repulsion is the reaction of said forces.

Both are firmly rooted in the work of author William Malmborg. The eponymous character of his first nov-

el, Jimmy, is a regular high school kid who enjoys all the leisure activities of his age group: friendly banter with his brother, fast food, video games. These are not repulsive traits. They would make fine ingredients for a protagonist in any bildungsroman, or coming of age novel.

What separates Jimmy from other kids is his inability to connect with females. On its own, this is a relatable disposition for adolescent males with burgeoning hormones. That's not Jimmy's sole problem. He also has a young woman from school restrained in the abandoned home of a family of doomsday preppers.

While this would certainly qualify the character of Jimmy Hawthorn for any rogues gallery, his sadistic behavior is inconsistent throughout the length of Malmborg's novel. Indeed, he rarely displays any violent characteristics outside of that ramshackle home on the Hood property. *Jimmy* is a cauldron of catharsis. From the time Jimmy started recording scenes of damsels in distress on blank VHS tapes, he had the impulse. It is only in the closing chapters that we witness the blowback from Jimmy's choices reshape the small town of Ashland Creek.

As he is the man who conceived this literary *Fangoria* After School Special, it is his child to defend or disown.

SG: In reviewing the material in Jimmy, I actually found I could relate to the main character, as far as his adolescent fantasies. Do you get a lot of this from readers?

WM: I do get quite a few messages from readers tell-



ing me how they identified with Jimmy and felt a sense of familiarity in what he was going through. Sexual fantasies are something everyone experiences during adolescence, and are almost a constant companion for many throughout the later teen years. Fear comes with it, fear that is often based in the notion that one may never actually get to experience the fantasy they frequently think about, as well as the fear that others might find out what their fantasies are due to the odd sense of shame that often accompanies the public's view of everything relating to sex. The result of this is that many teens feel trapped and alone even when surrounded by friends and family, something that Jimmy has to deal with throughout the novel.

SG: Have your friends and family been accepting of this subject matter in your work?

WM: My friends and family have all been very accepting of everything I've written, though not all of them can read it. My mother, who is a huge fan of this type of novel, had to call it quits simply because she couldn't separate herself from the fact that I had created such a disturbing character and that he bore an uncanny resemblance to me.

SG: The material can certainly be demanding at times, especially for the female portion of the audience, I would imagine. It's certainly not unique to *Jimmy*, as *Text Message* also dealt with a woman in a distressing situation based on sexual deviance. Have there been any negative experiences stemming from this treatment of women in your fiction?

WM: Thus far, I've never had any negative feedback based on the way women are treated in my fiction. In fact, I've had many women express admiration for the thoughts and mental depictions of the women in these situations, because they felt it was very realistic. Some of my female readers have even come forward and told me that they themselves have been victims of abuse and rape, and that while reading my work they felt a connection with the female characters that they hadn't felt with women in other books that depict similar situations. One even told me that reading one of my novels helped them exorcize some of the pain they still felt several years later. That email, which arrived one morning on Facebook, really caught me off guard (in a good way) and sparked what has become a very meaningful friendship.

Taking the answer one-step further, I believe that the strength my female characters display is another big reason why there hasn't been any negative feedback. The women in my stories are never 'ready made victims' who were 'asking for it' which happens quite a bit in fiction. Instead, they are real everyday women who, unfortunately, find themselves caught in a horrible situation, one that they do their best to escape.

SG: Have you noticed a progression from one novel to the next? What have you learned about the writing process with each one?

WM: I can't really pinpoint anything I've learned about the writing process with individual novels, nor have I really noticed a progression from one novel to the next. I think overall the most important thing I ever learned with writing is that no amount of thinking will get a novel written, you just have to sit down and do it.

SG: How has Crohn's Disease impacted your work, if at all? There was at least an entire year of your life where you were in constant agony, correct?

WM: You are correct. In early 2005 my small bowel and bladder became fused together due to repeated bowel infections from the then undiagnosed Crohn's Disease. Eventually the infections created a hole between the two causing fecal matter to seep into the bladder and exit through my urinary track. The stories produced during that time have a darkness to them that is different from the typical darkness one usually would find in my work. It seems harsher and less forgiving. My tale "Sunburn," which was written at the worst of that painful period, is probably the best example of this. Now, following my surgery in 2006 and eventual remission, it becomes harder to see the impact upon my work, but I can't deny that one is there. Living with an incurable autoimmune disease changes things, especially ones perspective on life, and since my writing is a direct result of that perspective, it can't help but be shaped by it.

SG: Your latest novel is *Nikki's Secret*. What is it about?

WM: *Nikki's Secret* is the story of a young lady named Kimberly who is attempting to restart her college career after a traumatic tragedy led to her flunking out of a different school several years earlier. Not long after moving into her new apartment, she begins

receiving packages for someone named Nikki, packages that contain items of a sexual nature. Men start showing up as well, ones who seem to think they have a sexual encounter planned with Kimberly who they know as Nikki. Threats follow, and eventually Kimberly enlists the aid of the writer living above to help find out who is responsible for directing the men to her place. Little does Kimberly know, the writer may have more information about the situation than he initially lets on.

SG: Which is a more comfortable medium for you: novels or short stories?

WM: I'm certainly more comfortable with novels these days given how much character developed goes into my work. Much of my writing deals with an internal struggle within a character, which is something I just can't seem to accomplish in the confines of a short story. Every attempt these days turns into a longer piece of work.

SG: For younger writers out there, would you recommend they start with short stories or dive right into the process of the novel?

WM: That is a tough one. I'd say the best course of action is to simply write what they feel compelled to write and not worry so much on defining what category it will end up in. Writing every day should be the main focus of new writers. Teaching the body to be creative and to produce pages without much thought is the goal. Once one can do that the stories and novel will start to flow.

SG: I understand you've begun writing your next novel. Can you provide a hint of its content here?

WM: My next novel, which is tentatively titled DARK HARVEST (I like that title, but some of the publishers that are interested in it told me it needs to change if I decide to go that route), is the tale of a young man searching for his ex-girlfriend who disappeared in a small Illinois farm town while taking photographs for a college class. No one in town has any idea what happened to her, though most do remember her given the unusual interest she had in capturing a picture of a well-crafted scarecrow. The question is did she ever find what she was looking for, and, in doing so, maybe more than she bargained for.

SG: Which authors have informed your writing most?

WM: Stephen King was probably the biggest influence. I began reading King a few months into my writing adventure and fell in love with his style of writing. I also became fascinated by his story, and realized fairly quickly that the reason he had succeeded in becoming successful was simply because he was determined to do so and kept at it. Brian Lumley, Clive Barker, F Paul Wilson, Dean Koontz and Dan Simmons also have played a big part in my development as a writer, mostly because I love their novels and often find myself desiring to craft something that would match their writing abilities.

SG: Do you see yourself doing this for the rest of your life, or do you worry that one day, the well will run dry?

WM: Without a doubt, I see my writing as a lifetime career. I have no worries that things will run dry. In time it might become more and more difficult to tell a story in a way that is unique to my body of work, but as far as ideas go, there is always an abundance.





The Handicap Stall

O. D. Hegre

I knew an old woman from Maine,

So abused and put to shame

That she up and died

But her love survived

And revenge, it seems, also remained.

The old bitch was dead – in the ground five days, according to the nurse up on first floor. Did that asshole, Ernie, call with the bad news? No way. They'd set up to trade hours a week ago and no doubt the jerk had plans ... didn't matter to old Ernie that someone else might have plans, as well. Dewayne Phelps sipped his coke and fondled the candy bar. This totally screwed up his love life ... totally.

He tugged at his crotch. Probably killed herself just to get rid of him. That brought a smile to his face. Nah. No way. She loved her sister ... loved her too much for her own good. The smile broadened.

Phelps was back in his little office; the last set of restrooms finished; the 'crappy' part of the night's work completed. He could always find the right words, he thought as he unwrapped the bar. Now he could sit on his ass for another half hour while the floors dried.

With some effort, Phelps managed to get his feet up onto the desktop. He took a moment to catch his breath, then bit into the soft candy. Love - that emotion - gave him the advantage. He had never allowed himself the weakness. Well, maybe chocolate ... he looked down at the bar ... maybe he loved chocolate. He drew his wrist across his damp forehead. But people? Anyone he'd ever let get close used him just as he had used her. He took another bite. Sister Mounds. That's what he called her. She was his candy.

The way they ran these homes? Just to his liking. Outside, protecting the facility and grounds, plenty of security. Inside, protecting the residents, virtually nothing. Phelps had made a career of this. Take care of them during the day (if that's what you called it) but on some nights? Well ... He would choose carefully. The real goofy ones got out of hand, at times. These two, Almond-Joy and Mounds? Perfect. Twins had something

special going on between them, they said ... especially identical ones. Why Almond-Joy was nuts - out of her mind with that Alzees-whatever disease - and the other, just fresh as a summer breeze? He didn't understand. But he made his time with them. Coddled them. He helped Mounds with her sister when he could. Shined up to her, showing his 'good' side and then when he had it all figured out. Phelps made his move.

Shit! His feet slid off the desk taking the coke with them.

He'd forgotten to Johnny brush out the toilet in the women's handicap stall up on the third floor. With the bad luck of the bitch's demise, why shouldn't things only get worse tonight? Phelps paused for a moment, the candy melting in his mouth. Forget it. Some other jerk wore the 'most conscientious' custodian badge.

He got up and grabbed a soiled rag from the bin and tossed it at the leaking can.

Despite his spotty work record, they kept him on. With the recent facility expansion and booming economy, new hires demanded more money. He took what they gave him because money played second fiddle for him. His concerns centered on the residents, he told management. No complaints from those folks - the office jerks appreciated that. Phelps looked into the mirror above his desk. It was true. The residents liked him - most of them, that is. That thought brought the smile back to his face.

With his good leg, Phelps pushed the rag into the spreading puddle.

The old ladies loved his smile; they loved him and for some he did the same - in his own way, of course.

As the rag sucked up the brown liquid it slipped just a bit. His other knee, the bad one (the one his third wife had shattered with her kid's aluminum baseball bat), buckled under the shifting weight of his body and he fell back ... into the chair.

For a few minutes Phelps just sat there, his heartbeat slowly returning to normal. A change of luck? Maybe ... and he bit off another chunk from the bar.

He looked up at the clock: 9:35 p.m. "Rick the Prick". He laughed out loud at his words. He loved that little rhyme - used it whenever possible. Phelps really hated the asshole and he knew 'the Prick' returned the favor. Rick's mother resided over in Building Three - Assisted Living quarters. He never worked there. As Custodial Supervisor, Rick saw to that.

No, Phelps worked with the 'normals,' and again he laughed. Normal? These useless old people, the aging population that dominated this town within the city - this little town of ungrateful elderly rich retired snobs who lived where he worked; playing card games (the room's too hot; the room's too cold), swimming (and urinating or worse) in the pool, walking tediously on the treadmills (a symphony of flatulence filling the room - how do they keep their feet on the ground with all that gas boiling about in their degenerating bowels?) and piss and shit in his toilets. He could understand how the old farts could urinate all over the rim of the bowl - he did it himself - but he couldn't figure out how the ladies could pee on the underside of the seat ... on the fucking underside!

And it would be there for sure, on the underside of that toilet seat up on the third floor. Maybe even a blowout. Rick never missed an inspection - he'd come by around ten with his goddamn kit and UV light. If it was there, 'Rick the prick' would find it ... and maybe dock him two days pay.

Phelps eyed the clock again: 9:40 p.m. Now he'd not only have to climb three flights of stairs again - he popped the last of the candy bar into his mouth - he would have to walk on a wet floor. It couldn't be helped.

Phelps made his way down the hall. A couple of robe-clad residents mumbled at him. He ignored them. Not the normals, this was Ernie's crowd ... the nursing care crowd and the real nut bags. The occasional switch with Ernie got him this group. The easy pickins group; the group he wanted.

He stopped by their room. At the door he could hear gentle snoring. He peeked in. Almond-Joy lay sleeping, probably dreaming and not even aware of what had happened. The other bed - the dead sister's bed - stood perfectly made. He wouldn't be messing that one up tonight.

Phelps leaned up against the wall and sighed. At least the memories remained.

Mounds would do anything for her sister and when Phelps told her that first night what he intended, she just sat there paralyzed. Love. Christ, what a pitiful weakness. He knew he'd gotten to her so good she probably couldn't believe her own ears ... big ears, as big as her lips ... he liked that. He waited for her to cry out ... of course she knew her only help worked two floors down at the nurse's station. Nobody but Mounds and him ... and the Nut bar. Mounds didn't make a sound. She just dropped her knitting and

looked at him like somebody had killed her dog. He moved over to Almond's bed and sat down beside the sister – her eyes closed, her breathing so gentle. He put his hand on her shoulder and looked over. Mound's eyes swelled like big saucers ... filled to the brim with tears. He liked that. His hand moved down, beneath the front of her gown, and he squeezed; Almond-Joy's eyes remained closed but she jerked a bit and he could hear the halting sound as Mounds tried to draw air into her lungs. He looked over. The sister's eyes had turned into black pools of anguish. He liked that even more. Then he slowly pulled up Almond's gown. Again he looked over into those eyes; they told him everything he needed to know. With his other hand Phelps started to unhitch his belt buckle.

Mounds hadn't protested and he had little fear she would resist. And yet... He followed her eyes. No point in taking chances and he picked up the knitting off the bed. He pulled out the two long needles. She stared at him. He tapped one of the needles down across the other a couple of times - like a pair of index fingers. "Tisk, tisk. Just think good thoughts," he had said. "It's candy time."

Just the memory of it eased the pain in his joints. Phelps had played that game for what - nearly three months now? And maybe only once every other week with this pair. What the hell, he wasn't a pervert or anything - just when he needed some tenderness. But now with the bitch dead... Of course some candy still remained unwrapped. He looked over at the gently snoring Almond-Joy. Maybe something different with the nut bar. But still, tenderness – he'd find something to en-Joy later tonight and he smiled at his cleverness ... something. He let the door of the sisters' room slowly close behind him.

Yellow caution signs and waste bins stood in front of the bathroom entrance.

"Custodian! Hola. Custodian."

Phelps found it amazing, how many times - even with the door blocked - they would just go right in. Can't read? Don't read ... don't care ... entitled. Bladder's bursting, bowels gurgling ... got to go right now. Don't want to walk in on that. Especially in the ladies ... be fired for sure.

"Custodian. Coming in."

The kick-stop slid slowly on the wet floor, closing the door behind him. Phelps carefully made his way over the glistening tiles. Six stalls, five commodes standing at attention. That's what they looked like with their seats vertical. A little trick of the trade - leave the seat up after cleaning. Nobody sits their fat ass down, does their

business, wipes their privates and then puts the seat back up. You see the seat up, you don't bother to clean ... more time to sit on your own ass.

The last stall - the handicap stall – stood before him. The lemony fragrance of the disinfectant still filled the room. He lifted the lid. Bingo ... never a doubt he'd find it there. The door gently pushed on his backside as Phelps bent over the bowl.

SMACK!

The sharp sound echoed through the room.

What the-? Phelps' knees cracked as he rose up a bit to look around the door. His eyes moved down the row of mirrors until he could just see into the first stall.

The toilet seat was down.

He could also see that the main entrance door remained closed.

He quickly finished up the commode and again, as he turned, his eyes focused on the reflection of the first stall. Phelps could no longer see the seat because something blocked his view ... a knee. And from the knee hung a leg rising atop a bare foot, bluish in cast.

He jerked backward into the handicap stall, the Johnny brush sliding from his hand. He stood there for a moment, his face warm and prickly. A chill rolled across his shoulders. Again, he stepped out and looked at the reflection of stall number one: a bright white commode with the seat down and ... empty.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell is going on?" It didn't even sound like his own voice. He crouched down. His hand shaking as he grabbed the brush. Near floor level, the smell of the disinfectant was stronger but now mixing with something unfamiliar. Something sweet, not like chocolate - heavier, earthen ... old. Phelps choked back the partially digested slurry that had risen into his throat. That chocolate, that thing he loved – maybe ... not so tasty the second time around.

He forced his knees to respond.

Up now, moving fast, Phelps made his way toward the door. *For God's sake, get the hell out of here!* His shoes squeaked with each step on the wet tiles. "Damn that prick, Rick." Mumbling ... he needed to make some sound to cover the ringing in his ears.

Passing the first stall, he tried to smile as he looked in.

She sat there. He could see both legs now, the knees popping as they opened to him. Long toes, tipped with cracked red polish, wiggled like great maggots – caked dirt falling onto his clean floor. Phelps closed his eyes for a moment. The ringing in his head crushed in on him. Eyes open again, his gaze passed over her brown-spotted thighs, past the glistening dark patch between her spread legs ... up the drooping skin of her belly, beyond her flattened blue veined breasts that flopped about as she shook her bony shoulders, to her arms that stretched out to him. He looked into her face. Dark holes - where eyes should have been - stared back at him ... not just dark holes, black pools of anguish. Phelps watched her blue tongue. It flicked about in her mouth. Was she saying something to him? The ringing - the incredible ringing – in his ears now blocked out any other sound.

Phelps reached for the door handle. The wet floor offered no traction. He saw the fluorescent fixture pass in front of him – one bulb out, he'd have to fix that – and then he hit the floor ... hard. The light dimmed; he felt the world slipping away. As he drifted something sharp ran across his face. It pushed into his cheek ... once ... twice. Then Phelps heard it - over the ringing in his ears, the slight clicking sound. As neurons depolarized and chemicals flooded from his primitive brain, his conscious mind managed to recognize the sound. Then Phelps heard the voice.

“Tisk, tisk. Just think good thoughts. But ... no more candy.”

He opened his eyes, just in time to see the knitting needles-.

The clicking sound was gone; the ringing was gone; replaced by the shrieking – the ghastly screams that reverberated off the tile walls, all the way down to the handicap stall. There, with each wretched wail, tiny ripples made their way in the clear water of the sparkling clean bowl.

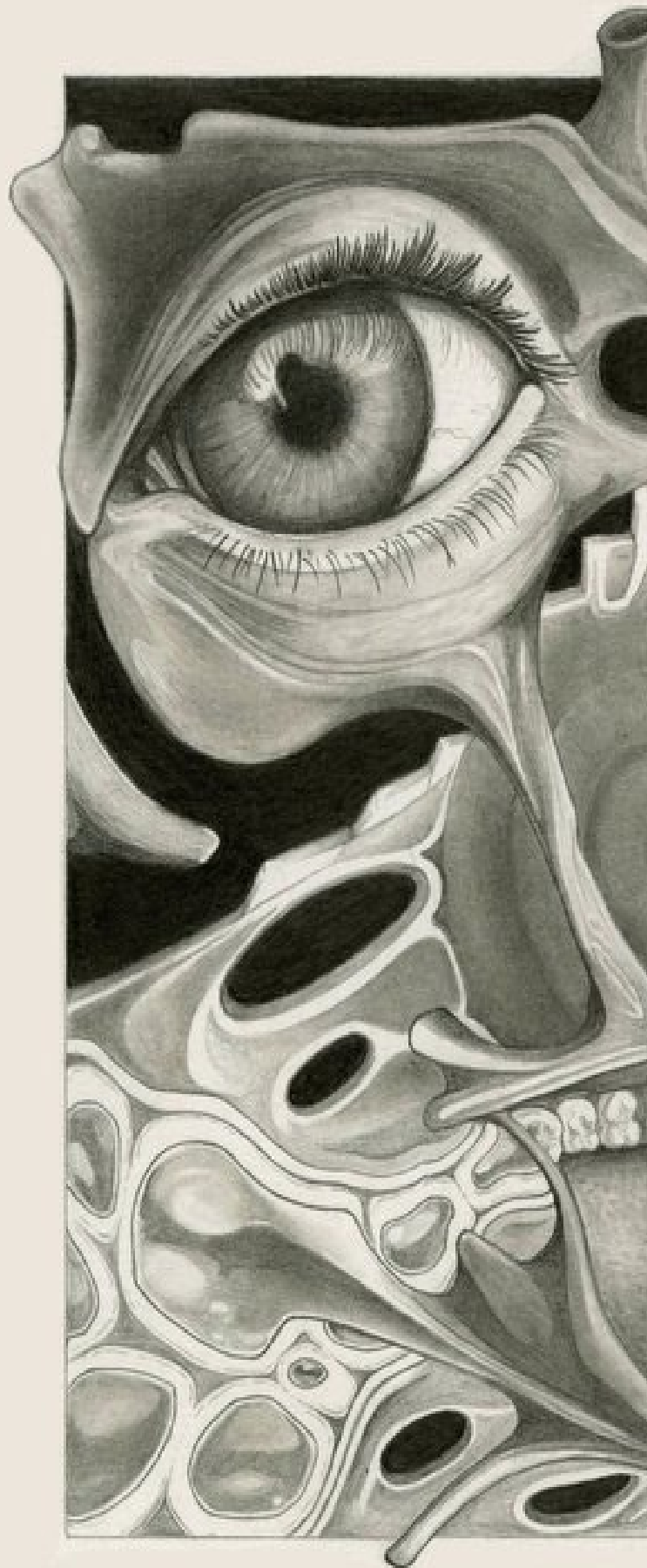
I knew an old woman from Maine.

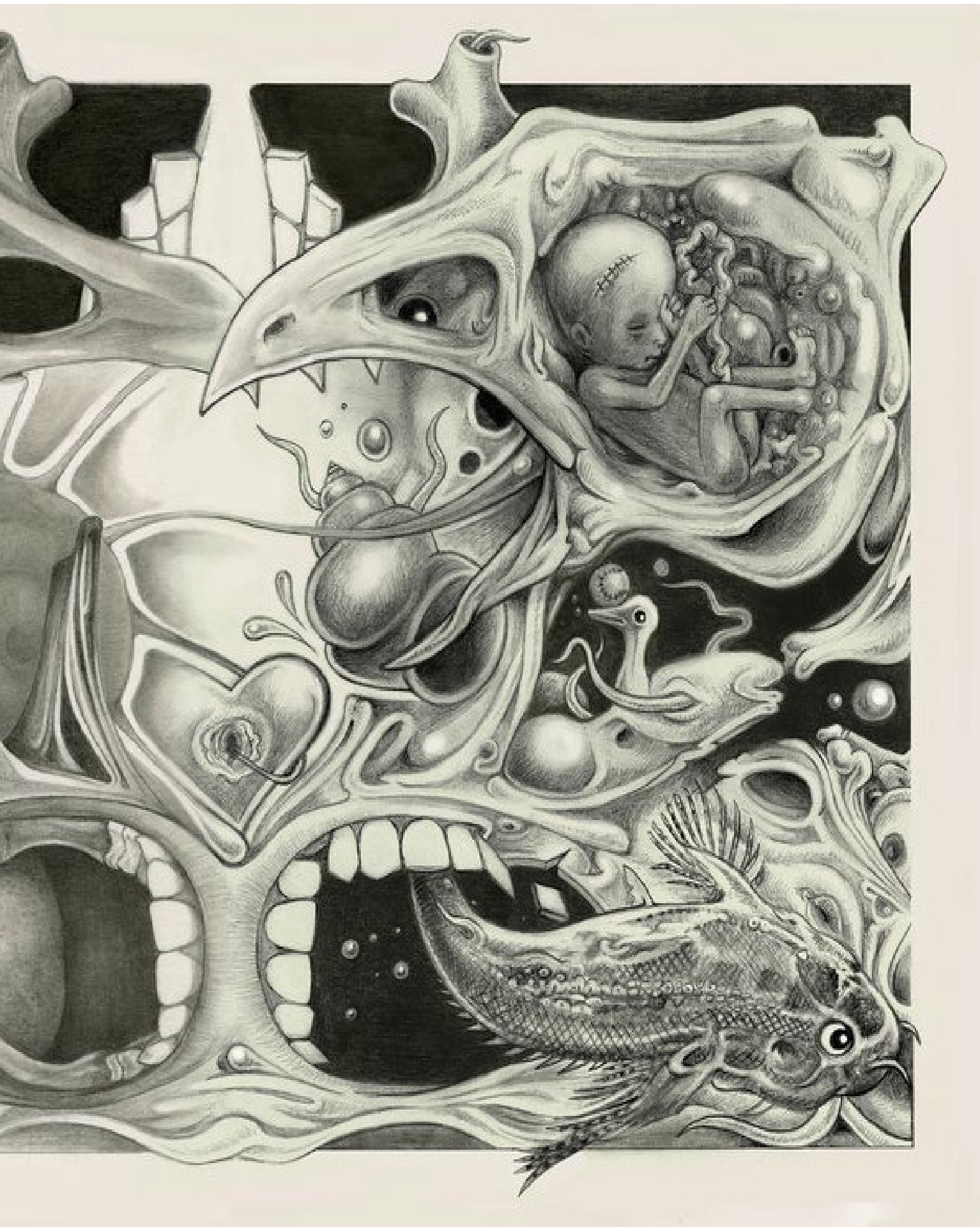
Much abused and put to shame.

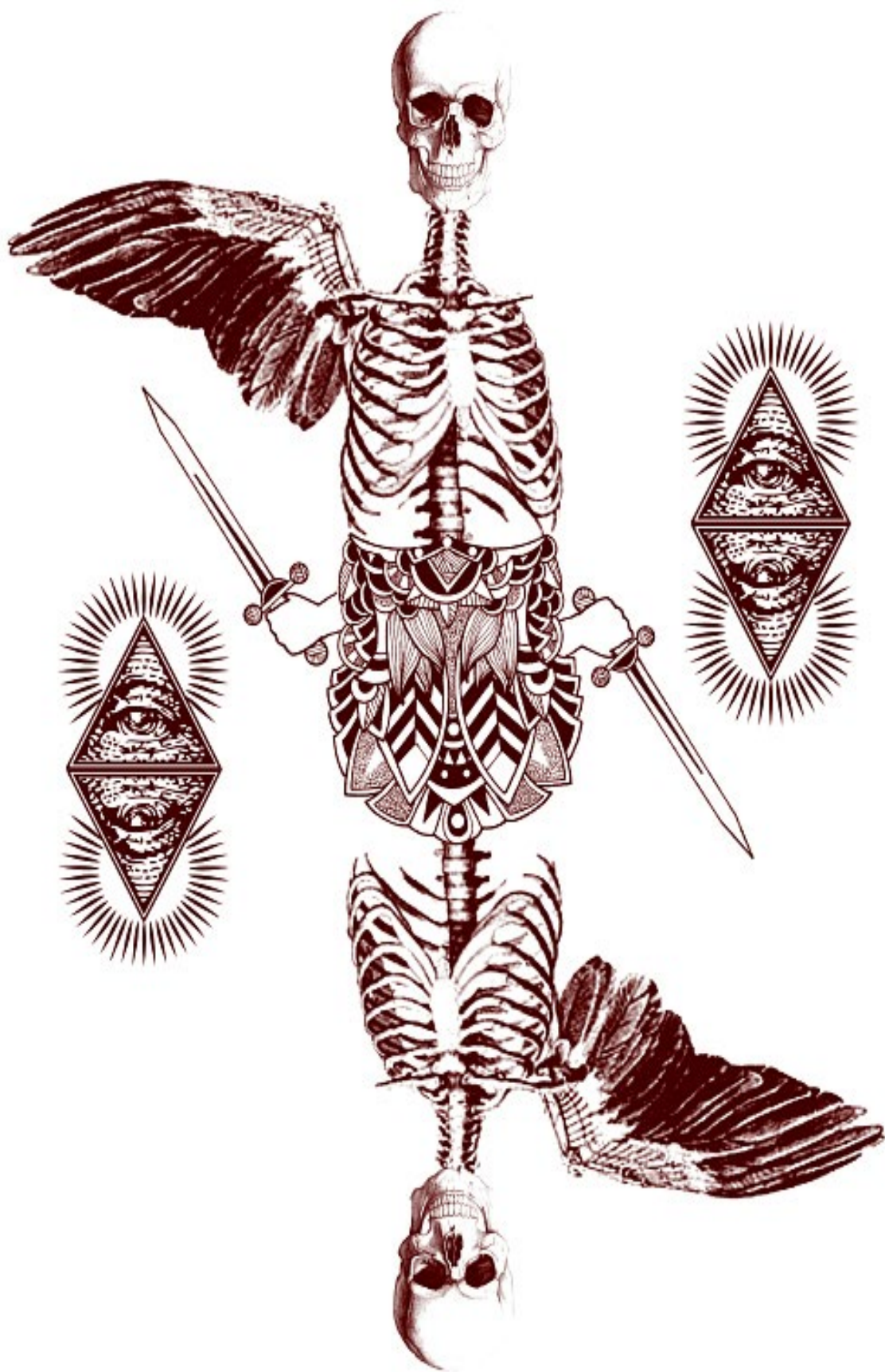
Although she had died,

And buried they tried,

For love she came back all the same.







Dimension

By Matt Denniss

From a single perspective you can never be sure about a person. But knowing someone as two people is like looking at the sky at night and realising the moon is not some two dimensional circle painted onto the black, but a three dimensional sphere floating in space. You can't see an optical illusion with one eye. Open that second eye and suddenly you're looking at something altogether different. I've come to know my father this way. And I'm beginning to wish I could close that second eye.

Hunter

I try be the good friend so I say "You and your wife getting along?" I take another gulp of the beer and look around for some nuts. My bar is empty. The girl I pay to run this place is on her mobile phone and isn't worth the wage I am paying her. She has great breasts though, and sadly it's a major drawcard for the losers that come here. Like the guy I'm talking to, my father.

"Yeah," he says, shaking his head and bringing the glass to his lips, "we fuck," and then he takes a gulp. "There's an element of hate in it though, like paying your drug dealer retrospectively, after he's trapped you in addiction."

Yeah, okay.

"Trisha," I call, and she doesn't respond. She is laughing into the phone and it does something horrible to her face. Worse are the unbroken waves that bulge threateningly over the top of her jeans.

"Great tits though," my father says and I nod.

It's hard to remember now but when I was young I think I was actually pretty optimistic about the guy. It wasn't until I met him as a friend that I could see him in all the indecency of three dimensions.

"Darla had tits like that, 'till the kids sucked the life out of 'em. Never been the same." He finishes his beer and slams it on the bench but Trisha doesn't notice.

It's hard to listen to my father talk about my mother like this, for two reasons. No only am I this man's son,

but quite exclusively, I am his friend. When I say exclusive, I mean physically. How I look, what I do, where I am. Put simply, I have two Medicare cards and vote twice at each election. The son, my name is Brett. That's who visits when there's a birthday or a death or a wedding.

Now the friend I am, well, my name is Hunter. Somehow, my father was drawn to me like a magnet. I'd never expected the overlap. He came in here one day and he sure didn't recognise me, no way, I was a total stranger just pulling him a beer and I guess that's what he needed more than anything that evening. The stranger, not the beer. Though he's got to know both well.

"Bruce, you have a family and a nice home - things people work their whole lives for. Don't do anything too dramatic without thinking about it. Like, really think about it." I say this considering my sister, how it would affect her. Wondering what my mother would do without him. Would she go back to that school teacher guy that my father told me he caught her kissing a few years back?

"Did I ever tell you my son works a bar?" he says.

"Yeah," I say, "Brett? Sounds like a good son."

"Yeah...takes after his mother too much. No guts." She should 'a just fucked the guy, he said in here one night after a few.

"How much do you pay this bitch?" he asks, pointing his hand as a gun in the direction of Trisha.

"Jesus, Bruce."

"Well? How much?"

Brett

Three nights later I pull into the driveway but then reverse out and park my car across the street. He's told me at the bar how much he hates it when my deadbeat son comes over and parks his shitty car in my driveway. It's like a giant dog shit right in the middle of the lawn, on display for the benefit of the sneering neighbours. The neighbours don't sneer. I was babysat by their eldest daughter and kicked a soccer ball on the front lawn with their son after school. But things changed when they called the cops one night recently, after they heard yelling. Bad yelling, worse than usual. And I guess my father won't let it go. My parents come to the door and my father calls out "Why don't you park in the driveway?" He is smiling and warm and my mother looks happy at his side and I just sit

there in my car wondering how the fuck they do it.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Brett," my father says and he hugs me at the door and it feels good. It my sisters Jamie's birthday and she has brought a new boyfriend over. I say hi to my sister and am introduced to this new guy. He seems okay. My father likes him I think and that means a lot to Jamie. I can just tell.

"These Patterson girls," my father says to Jamie's boyfriend, referring to my mother's maiden name, "they sure can cook, sonny." He pats his belly. "Oh yeah, Jamie, if you wannna seal the deal with this fine young man, I recommend learning to cook like your mother." In the kitchen, with an oven mit in one hand and a glass of red in the other, she smiles and there is no way that it looks fake, and it makes me feel like I am in a dream where reality doesn't count.

"You're a lucky man," I say to my father, and he nods.

"At their wedding," Jamie says to her boyfriend, "my father said that he felt like he could do anything in life if he could get the best girl in the world to marry him. How sweet is that?"

My mother begins to cry in the middle of the kitchen and my father says to me in a low voice "Your mother is struggling with, that thing, what do you call it... menopause."

Jamie's boyfriend is looking for the nearest exit which is a two story drop out of a window. I don't blame him - I'm thinking about it too. Suddenly my mother begins to laugh and my father is laughing with her and they sound more like hyenas than people who are trying to act happy. Jamie can't see it and her boyfriend is now really considering that two story drop.

Hunter

"Do you see much of your kids?" I ask Bruce the following night.

"Yeah," he says. "But I'm not sure for how much longer."

"Why?"

"Because I've decided to do it."

"What?"

"I'm leaving Darla." He's actually leaving my mother?

"Why?"

"Because there is no reason to stay with Darla. I want to be with other women, ya' know?"

"No."

"She's gone stale. And life is short and after what happened a few weeks ago, after we got to shoving each other that night, I just thought I don't want to do it. I don't want to hurt her anymore"

"Just try harder at making it work," I demand and it surprises him.

"Well thanks for your support, Hunter. Great fucking friend you are."

"I'm just saying you're going to hurt people in ways you can imagine if you do this."

"Yeah...well, the only person you really gotta live for is yourself. It's my prerogative." He says this and it makes me feel like hitting him how proud he sounds.

As Trish pours him a beer he winks at her "How 'bout you and me, sugar tits? I'm a free agent now. Look out world." She ignores him like the rest of the dirty old men that frequent this place.

"You're an old fuck," I say.

"Not too old to get a good blow job on a Saturday night," he laughs.

"What the fuck?"

"Oh yeah," he boasts and Trisha rolls her eyes and walks away. "Best damn blow job of my life. Pretty little brunette girl. Not even the slightest hint of a pelvic floor problem, which is a nice change to what I'm used to." He closes his eyes and smiles, savouring the memory.

"A fucking hooker?"

"Yeah. A professional. So what?"

"Jesus. You're a father."

"And a husband."

"Get the fuck out of my bar," I demand. At this his expression turns sour.

"Listen, I love my wife, but I'm just like all the rest. Stranded in a marriage with a woman I don't know. I feel like I've spent the last twenty years in neutral and now I want to feel a high again. And if that means there's a few lows coming my way well bring it on,

but I'm not gonna slowly rot from the inside anymore. People might have perfect houses and cars and perfect gardens and pools and family portraits, but their minds are far from the perfect image they project."

"But you said she was the best girl in the world."

"What?"

"You said it at your wedding."

"How the fuck would you know, Hunter?"

Before I can notice the look of desperate aggression in her eyes, Trisha slams a schooner glass over the Bruce's head and it knocks him from his stool. His body is limp on the ground as if he's just been king hit by a boxer.

"I'm sorry Boss," Trisha says, holding her bleeding hand, her arms shaking and eyes wide, "I caught my husband last week with another woman. I'm a little emotional and this guy is a jerk."

"...Okay."

"Can I go home?"

"...Okay."

She begins to leave and I wonder what just happened. Is she right to drive? At the door she turns, and asks "Hey, Hunter, is he dead?"

"No."

"Oh, good. Bye." I like Trisha.

I fish the phone out of his pocket and call my mother. Surrounding the name Darla is Debbie and Diane and I don't want to know who these women are any more than I want to know who my father is.

"Hello, ahh, Darla, my name is Hunter. I'm a friend of your husbands. You need to come and get him."

My mother arrives and she looks like she's the one who has just been hit. I've never seen her like this. She is exhausted and defeated, her shoulders are slumped and there is no pride left. I want to put my arms around her. I say that Bruce drank too much and can't drive. He is conscious but concussed, rambling about being stuck in neutral and now more than ever my mother reminds me of a victim. She barely says a word but "Thank you" after I get him in the car.

"Patch this shit up or you're not drinking here anymore," I say as I close the door. But all I can think

is that the damage is done. I give Darla my number and tell her to call me if she has any troubles with him. I'm not sure if I mean tonight or anytime, but I hope she calls.

It all happens over the next few weeks. I don't see my father at all. He doesn't come into the bar and my sister and I don't visit the house. I speak to Jamie and she doesn't know what is going on. She tells me that her boyfriend proposed and that she doesn't know what to do. I don't know what to tell her. I don't know what anyone could possibly tell her.

I wonder if my mother is okay but I know she isn't. I want to see her. She calls the bar and she asks for Hunter and Trisha says to me "Hey, there's a lady on the phone for you. Is it your mother?" And I say yeah.

I believe what my father said at his wedding. About how he felt like he could do anything in life if he could get the best girl in the world to marry him. He did love my mother more than he thought anyone in the world could love another person. And now, cramped in a life they thought they wanted, they blame each other for their disappointment. It's like two people in a small boat; happy in the calm seas of a bright day, but when the seas turn choppy and that little boat begins to rock with them knocking into each other, banging knee's, bumping shoulders and knocking heads, they hate one another just for being there.

I drive to my parents' house and park in the driveway. Walking through the house I can tell that Bruce has been gone for a while. I don't know how, it's not as if he was messy and now the place is clean, or that he had a bunch of personal items that are now absent. But it just feels different. This house is finally not my home, but I guess it never has been. I've never been here before.

"I'm glad you came, Hunter." There's a look in her eyes, of fear and guilt and I know she is thinking about Bruce and me and my sister. She is at a ledge and if she jumps she knows there is no way but down. But the fire behind her has been creeping up for years now. I want to tell her that I am her son and that she shouldn't feel guilty because I know that she is a wonderful person. But there's no way.

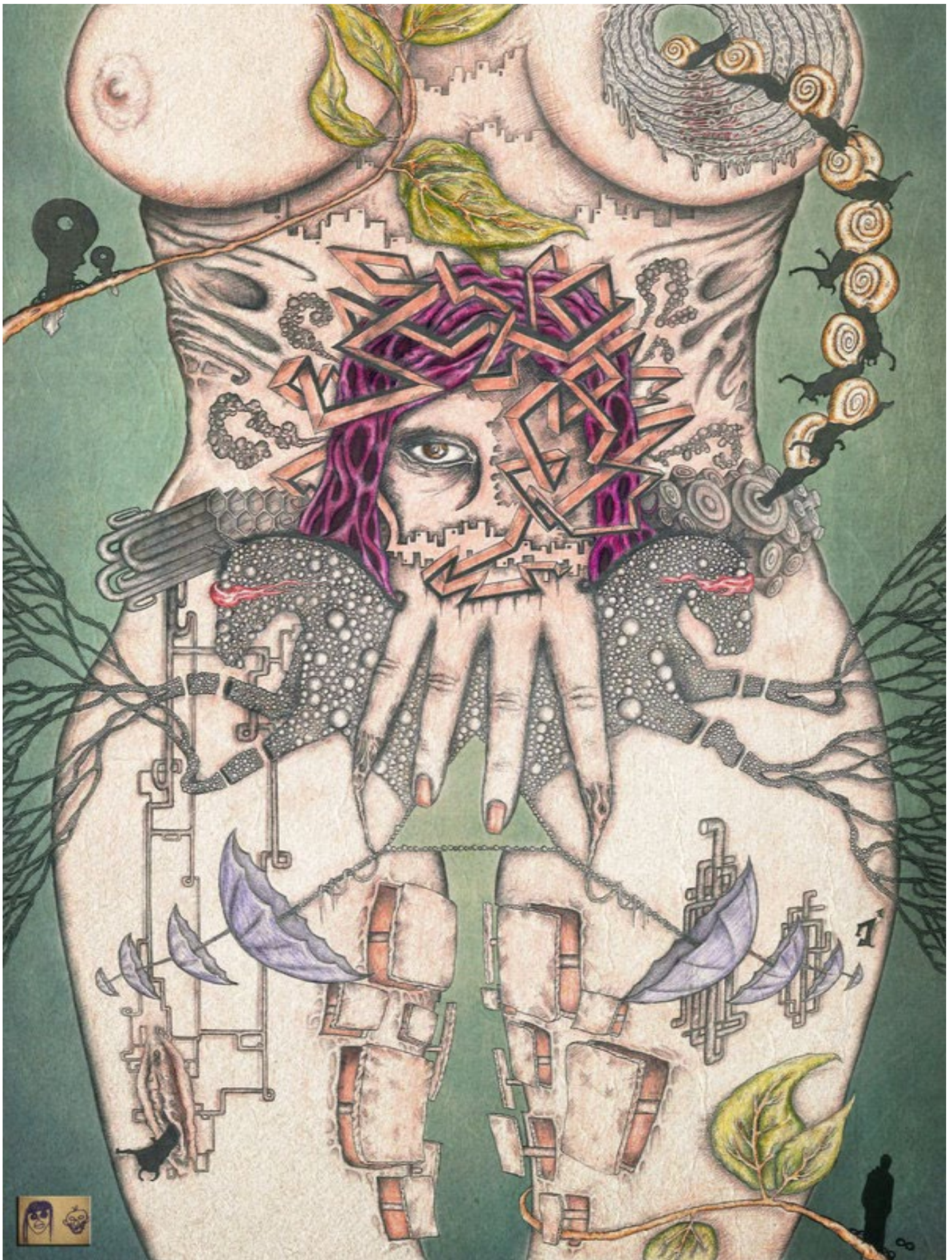
"I don't know who you are," she says as we move into the bedroom. I place a hand on the small of her back.

"But you didn't know your husband either," I say, removing my pants.

"Or myself, I guess," she says, pulling me onto the bed.

I tell her to close her eyes and imagine my father never existed.





Pros and Cons of Being a Disembodied Head by Mark Grzywacz

Walter was reading in his study. At the hour that late, he should be fast asleep. But he forced himself to stay awake. He was doing research. Not for work, he had not worked a day in his life. Inheriting from rich parents is certainly a best way to assure a peaceful, perfectly boring existence. Although lately Walter was not enjoying his absurdly high standard of living as much as he should. In fact, he was about to end his life. Willingly.

Hence the research.

Krasue, known in some countries by other names and as even more exotic variations, is a evil spirit from the folklore of Southeast Asia, mostly Thailand and Cambodia. Basically, it is a ghost taking form of a woman's disembodied head. What's more disgusting, it has its entrails still attached to the neck. Pretty scary concept. It flies around at night, doing all kinds of nasty things and, well, eating humans. Especially pregnant ones, as krasue love to eat unborn fetuses and placentas. There are many variations of myth. In some, the beautiful girl, perfectly normal when the sun is up, reveals herself as hungry krasue when the night comes. In others, the demon is an old hag, hell bent on eating fetuses before delivery. The reason for becoming krasue also varies, from witchcraft to being too rich. Walter thought that the latter is pretty fitting. He was absorbing the knowledge by reading all the e-books and printed publications he could find; because the next day he and his wife were scheduled for dying and immortalization in the form of the demon resembling the vicious Asian ghost.

The PR magicians were calling it electronically assisted arcane transition, but no one was taking this term seriously. The phrase going undead turned out to be more popular. Not to mention all the joke names based on the fact that the newly immortal person has his or hers guts hanging below like a grotesque tail.

Walter relighted his pipe. He opened the next e-book on his big, holographic computer screen.

"What are you doing there, honey?"

Walter accidentally inhaled too much smoke. He coughed.

"I'm reading, Yvonne," he said, irritated.

"Enough with this nonsense, dear," she responded. "It's getting awfully late. Would you like some whiskey with Valium to make yourself go asleep faster?"

"I'm reading, woman," said Walter again, significantly angrier.

She left. Walter heard her loud steps and she was gone in a minute. He resumed his research session. If you have to become some kind of flying head monster, you ought to know everything about it.

#

Walter parked his Rolls-Royce next to one of those futuristic cars and instantly felt like an old-timer. He usually left the driving part of using a car to chauffeur, but this day was different. He liked the feeling of having control over something, even if it was just an automobile.

On the front of the skyscraper he saw an enormous LCD screen. It was showing the commercials for the services of Happy Eternity Corporation. The mascot of the company, joyful flying head of a girl with a big smile and brightly pink entrails attached, served as a cartoonish guide through the series of videos about people undergoing procedures needed to turn them into immortal, half-ghostly breed of satisfied clients.

Walter sighed.

"Having second thoughts?," Yvonne asked.

"More than that, honey. Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, there's still time to back out of this whole deal," he said.

"Darling, I'm not getting any younger, you know? And you don't want to spend eternity being old and ugly. It's now or never."

"Yes. But turning into some freaky colonial monster is a kind of a big deal," Walter replied as he searched for a lighter in the pocket of his pants. "It's better to double-check or even triple-check your readiness than having regrets later. I mean, it's a rather irreversible procedure, Yvonne."

"We talked about it many times. All of our neighbors are living happily and normally and they all went through this. Fear of changing into an abomination is for the people who can't afford to change into one, honey," she said and then she started to walk really fast, forcing him to follow her hastily. Such childish way to make her husband go there and be a man.

"Give me some time to smoke a cigarette, vile woman."

She stopped. Walter sighed again as he exhaled the smoke. The cartoonish krasue on the screen winked at him.

"You know how much our life is going to change?," he asked Yvonne.

"We've made preparations, my dear. I know it may seem awfully hard now, but everything has its pros and cons," she said.

"I think the pros are mostly for you"

"Now you're just being mean."

They have stopped talking. Walter putted out his cigarette and looked into Yvonne's eyes. She was determined.

He looked up. The sun was slowly finishing its daily travel across the sky.

"All right. Let's do it, for God's sake!" he said, forcing himself to sound brave.

#

Corridors of Happy Eternity Corporation headquarters were decorated to create the feeling of rich oriental heritage of the company. For an enterprise founded by a large collective of greedy Americans, that sure was a bold choice. Needless to say, all of the furniture, sculptures and paintings were mixed-up in the multicultural cauldron by someone who probably never visited any part of Southeast Asia. Lighting stylized to look like Chinese lanterns did not quite match the various imitations of Cambodian reliefs that were somewhat unsettling; maybe because they have resembled those seen in Apocalypse Now. The Malaysian folk art also looked out of place next to the Japanese ukiyo-e.

Poor aesthetic choices aside, they sure knew how to treat their guests nicely. Nice, skinny lady brought coffee for Walter and Yvonne as they waited for their appointment and on the table next to the sofas they have found wide selection of the newest issues of popular highlife magazines.

Walter had to admit that Happy Eternity Corporation was doing great and the idea to use black arts to

make rich people immortal was surely ingenious. The founder of company, wealthy traveler Jack R. Patterson, was actually attacked by krasue when he was visiting Laos. He fought off the ghost and followed it to its lair, where he witnessed the miraculous process of reattaching the head to the inanimate body of beautiful girl. Seeing the demon walking away as a perfectly normal human gave him the idea of using this immense power for profit. He spent many years gathering data, recruiting local practitioners of magic, copyrighting old spells and trying to find the way to tame the undead beast. He lost most of his friends, one wife even, and he became the laughing stock of the professional adventurers circles. But he succeeded. He turned Asian folklore into an sellable immortality program for American upper class. Those who have too much money and power fear death the most and would give anything a try. Especially if it really works.

Walter finished reading an article about water polo and was going to read the feature on the most fashionably heartless billionaires on Earth, but the doors on the left opened. Three persons came out of the room. One of them was a nice secretary with slanted eyes and short, jet-black hair. The other were men. One was wearing a lab coat and had a bad case of 80's hair. The second was well-dressed, Armani suit and nice tie, and seemingly in charge. He instructed the girl to leave and started looking at Walter with a big, corporate smile on his face.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Hayward . My name is Bill Debsky," he said, still smiling. "I'm your personal supervisor. I'm here to make sure that the transition process goes as smoothly and safe as humanly possible"

"Nice to meet you," Walter and Yvonne said simultaneously.

"The room is ready and the team is in place, so it's time for us. May we proceed?" Bill asked.

Walter looked at the cityscape outside the window. The afternoon traffic disappeared and streets were almost empty. The sun was still emitting its weak, final sunbeams from behind the skyscrapers.

There was a long moment of silence.

"No," said Walter with his voice changed. He sounded distressed. "I have some major doubts about safety of the procedure, Mr. Debsky. I need to talk with someone before we will enter the transition room. Is that alright?"

The strange grimace appeared on Yvonne's face. Bill was confused too but Walter seemed dead serious about it.

"Yes. If we must," Bill confirmed, but his smile vanished. "But I insist that we hurry. You are our last clients today and everyone's waiting. Mr. Hayward, please follow me to my office."

#

Debsky's office, unlike the corridors, was decorated by someone with the better taste and less marketing-guided imagination. Some IKEA-like furniture looked a bit cheap, but the very modern feeling and designer accessories were pleasant to look at. Bill sat down on his big armchair. He ignored the ringtone of his mobile and offered Walter something to drink. Bourbon turned out to be sufficient.

"Mr. Hayward, I understand your fears," he said as Walter was pouring liquor into his mouth. "But we guarantee that the process is completely safe. We've talked about it when you signed the papers."

"But I'm having trouble digesting the fact that you'll kill us and resurrect us. I've heard there were some cases that it went a little rougher than you describe it in your promo folders."

"No. I assure you. Those were rumors, negative PR by a group of companies that lose money because of our services. You know, cosmetics producers, funeral houses and similar. Oh, and Christian organizations. They hate us. But our methods, albeit controversial, are fully legal, tested and monitored by government observers," said Bill with a moderately sincere smile.

"Yes, but..."

"The procedure is safe and painless," Bill ignored Walter and continued. "Our injections are not like those used in carrying out the death sentences. No pain, you just fall asleep and wake up as a new, immortal being. Maybe slightly confused one, to be frank, but we provide psychologist help on spot and adjustment therapy, if needed."

"But what about, well, the demon inside? Is it completely dormant; will I be the same person as before?" Walter asked with a worried expression.

"You'll be completely yourself, Mr. Hayward. The

protective spells casting is the most important part of the transition procedure. The collar with arcane clamps-based mechanism, safety glyphs and lucky charms attached will keep your head from flying off,” Bill explained. “Of course, the diet may be a little disgusting at first, but there are so many restaurants serving the finest raw meat that you’ll love it after few days. We have contracts with hospitals all over USA, too, so we can provide fresh placentas to all clients that paid for the extended care packet.”

“And you can assure me that my new form wouldn’t be harmed or deformed in any way? Other than having body and head capable of being separate entities, of course. That death is no longer an option?” asked Walter.

Debsky raised the glass of bourbon, took a sip and his smile widened. It seemed like something made him very excited, like he had just figured out a really hard puzzle.

“You’re afraid because of what has happened with the wife of your friend. Oliver Meadows, that’s his name, right?” he asked.

After two minutes of shameful silence, Walter nodded.

“We’ve all heard what happened with Mrs. Meadows and we’re shocked,” Bill said with forced sadness in his voice. “Kidnapping of her body from sarcophagus when her head was at recreational flight at our facility was a heinous crime and we’ll hope that the police will find the culprit. We would also like to note that we insisted on leaving the body in our safety deposit, not in home sarcophagus. Mr. Meadows hadn’t trusted us. He heard that some individuals from our personnel may try to take an advantage of the bodies that are in their inanimate state, if you know what I mean. It’s complete and utter bullshit, I must add.”

“I was really devastated by Mandy’s untimely death. Or death at all. If only police would be able to locate body on time...” Walter said, also with sadness that sounded a little fake. “I’ve heard that the head burned in unholy flame at dawn. You must understand that this situation raised some doubts about quality of immortality offered by your company.”

“Our immortality is the best, probably the only one around also. You cannot die if you’re already dead. Being ghost has advantages,” said Bill and laughed. “But there are rules. Head dies if it doesn’t reattach itself to the body before the end of the night. Simple and clear. Well, burning the body may be fatal in some cases, it’s still physical, but the magic protecting is

probably too strong and who would do that anyway? As our technology allows to keep the head on the shoulders even after sunset, it’s no concern for our clients. It needs to fly from time to time, for obvious reasons of keeping the magic intact, but it does it in the safety of our special facility. I think, after all preparations you underwent, that you should understand it perfectly well, Mr. Hayward.”

“Yes, I understand and your words are making me calmer, I must say,” Walter replied and he finished his drink hastily.

The night had fallen. The city outside the windows was shining with millions of bright lights and neon signs. Gigantic screens on the tallest buildings of downtown were displaying colorful commercials of luxury products.

“All safe, Mr. Hayward. Pure oriental black magic, perfected by uncountable generations of its practitioners.”

“Let’s begin,” said Walter, certainly more confident.

#

In the first room Walter and Yvonne met people that were scheduled to assist their transformation. There was the 80’s hair guy with his two apprentices in slightly less white lab coats. There was an old Buddhist monk, who, as Bill explained, doubled as Taoist priest for full esoteric safety. There were also two men from security personnel, with stun batons and guns in holsters. The sight of weapons unnerved Walter a little, but Bill said that these are necessary precautions, never used anyway. The last person present was a technician sitting behind the big computer console in the right corner of the room.

The second room was, in fact, containment area. Walter was able to peek inside only thanks to one-way mirrors. On the wall of the containment room he could see a big screen, displaying seemingly random characters from some Asian alphabet. There was a bed inside also, that kind of bed, with straps and all, could only be found in mental hospitals.

“The bodies have some life in them even without the head, contrary to popular belief,” Bill said, with a comforting smile on his face. “They can tremble and shake or move around, in some cases. Sarcophagus is mounted at your home not only to protect the body



from harm, but also to ensure that the body won't be going anywhere if the head is separated."

Walter thought that straps are also there to make the dying person steady. Sudden movements and any signs of fear would surely scare family... or the client next in line.

The 80's hair guy approached Bill. He took him aside. They've whispered, but Walter could hear them anyway. Not too discreet of them, really.

"Isn't it too late to conduct a transition?" asked 80's hair scientist. "The ghost will be more active if we will cast the spells at night."

"They pay and they've waited several months for acceptance. Don't be a pussy, Jerry," Bill said, but his face seemed to be a little paler than before.

Walter was starting to feel definitely not ready enough. Bill came back to the rest of the group.

"Ok, time to start," he announced. "Mrs. Hayward will go first."

"What?" cried out Walter, surprised by this turn of events.

"Don't worry, Mr. Hayward. It's standard procedure. Changing woman is much easier than changing a man. It was originally female-only ghost genus, after all. We prefer to do easy transitions first," Bill explained. "I also think that if you'll witness the successful procedure before going in yourself, you'll be much calmer."

"It's ok, dear" said Yvonne.

Walter wasn't sure, but he complied. He had no one to support him.

Guards took Yvonne to the other room. The monks started some kind of mantra, but everyone else ignored him. Yvonne was strapped to the bed, collar placed around her neck, and the technician pressed some buttons on the console. The bed went from horizontal to vertical position. Yvonne seemed alright, even a bit cold and deprived of emotion for someone that will die soon. The guards returned and one of scientist's assistants went in. He injected the colorless substance into Yvonne's neck.

Walter wanted to cry. He trembled.

Yvonne was breathing very loud. Then, she closed her eyes. Her head lowered. She stopped moving. She

died silently.

Tears were flowing from Walter's eyes, but the rest of the observers haven't noticed. They have been busy monitoring the process.

The letters on the screen started to change very fast. They were forming those words in Thai symbols, elongated, parabolic and full of dots. Suddenly the voice joined the strange spectacle. It was synthetic, robotic even.

"We use LED screen and voice synthesizer to be sure that every word needed for the ritual is written perfectly and every chant and spell has no misspellings or other mistakes," said Bill. "Improper accent or spelling errors are very dangerous in dark arts. In some cases fatal to the witchcraft practitioner or to all participants. It's safer to make the casting automated".

"And the monk?" asked Walter

"Oh, arcane tech is reliable, but exorcisms and mantras can help if the otherworldly presence is too strong."

"You surely use word 'arcane' a lot," remarked Walter, still too nervous to engage in normal conversation.

"It's company policy. We have special language guidelines."

The talking stopped. Perfect silence, only the machines were buzzing and humming.

Yvonne opened her eyes. They were bright red, without pupils. She shrieked. Like a banshee. Like a monster.

"She wakes up, sir," said the technician.

Yvonne was moving her lips, but no words came out. Then she grimaced, she seemed to be in pain and Walter was ready to scream. With a loud POP, her head went up. First the spine, no blood, only bare bone. Then the rest. Lungs, stomach, intestines, kidney. Walter even saw something looking like a still-beating heart. He felt sick.

Yvonne's head was levitating above her neck, her now headless and dead body. She smiled. Then she showed her new teeth, sharp like knives.

"Honey?" Walter whispered. She could not hear him anyway.

"Let her fly around a bit, get the collar ready for

reattachment,” commandeered the 80’s hair guy.

“Everything’s alright,” Bill assured Walter, who was visibly shaking at this moment, like he was going through some kind of panic attack.

Yvonne was flying higher and higher. As if the ceiling became some kind of monster magnet. She smiled, her long, vampire-like fangs were hard to look at. She shrieked again, now Walter could hear excitement in her screams, as if she was celebrating her new form.

Then she attacked the air grate.

“What the hell?” 80’s hair guy shouted.

“Something’s wrong, sir,” said one of the assistants. “She won’t respond to the ghost-controlling spell of the highest power level. The head must reattach itself, now!”

Yvonne started biting the cover of ventilation shaft. She used her now enormous jaws. She pulled hard and with the loud sound of deforming, breaking metal, she torn the air grate from the wall.

Most of the observes literally stopped breathing at this moment.

“Freedom,” she screamed. “Bye, Walter. Goodbye, guys.”

She disappeared in the ventilation shaft. She was gone.

“Close the inner lid,” said Bill to the technician.

“It’s malfunctioning. Outer lid too, sir.”

“Burn it. Burn the body. It must not escape, for God’s sake. Do something.”

“No burning! It’s my wife,” said Walter. “If you’ll do something to the body, she’ll die.”

“The fire may not damage it anyway,” the technician pointed out. “She’s a highly powerful ghost now.”

“She can’t go out. What’s the status of the outer lid? Any lid? Dammit, those damn budget cuts compromised our security.”

“What kind of containment room has ventilation access anyway?” asked one of the guards.

“Too late. She’s out. Cameras on the roof caught an image of her, flying away. We screwed up big,” said the technician, really frightened.

The whole city should be frightened, in fact. The mythical krasue, probably completely wild, was on the loose.

Walter passed out.

Bill was running around, looking at the monitors and waving his arms chaotically. Guards were talking loudly, communicating with outside security forces. But police could not locate Yvonne’s head. Walter took a look at her body. It was motionless. Like someone decapitated her, but without all the gore that usually accompanies such a thing.

“We must destroy the body somehow,” 80’s hair guy insisted.

“No way. She’s my wife,” said Walter. “You are obliged to keep her alive.”

“She may kill. No, she will kill for sure. The procedure isn’t complete, Mr. Hayward. She’s a beast.”

“I don’t think so. She talked. She recognized me. She is conscious and herself. She must return before dawn, right? We’ll wait until she shows up and then you’ll finish the procedure” Walter fought bravely for his beloved.

“We must kill her before she’ll do something that will put our company in danger,” said Bill. He started to think that he would not like losing job very much.

“No burning. No killing, gentlemen. I’m calling my lawyers,” Walter said in fury. “If something happens to Yvonne, Happy Eternity Corporation will be ruined. I’ll sue anyone, even the guy who mopes the floor here.”

“You’ll have blood on your hands, Mr. Hayward,” said Bill.

But Walter was not listening. He cared only about his wife.

She had not returned. Walter terrorized the whole company, brought his lawyers, even phoned his friend at the city police department. All in vain. Many theories about her escape started to form. Bill thought that the radical Christian anti-undead groups had broken into the Happy Eternity Corporation headquarters and caused all the malfunctions. The



technicians thought that it was a fatal coincidence, not a sabotage attempt. The 80's hair guy was crying. He suddenly started to have a lot of concerns about ethics behind the path of career he chosen.

At dawn, with all hopes gone, Walter allowed them to burn the body. He wanted a proper burial, but two federal agents showed up to control the disposal of the remains according to the procedure.

Three security guards with military flame throwers and in full gear had entered the containment room. The body of Yvonne was burned in the intensely bright, chemical flames. Only blackened, headless skeleton remained.

Walter stopped his car at the front of the rented cottage. The lake was motionless, no wind, no animals around. Walter lighted up a cigarette. After the whole day of being questioned by police and signing all necessary papers, he needed the time to think.

He was not sure if everything went well.

The whole plan was a mess and he knew it, but Yvonne insisted and insisted. He had no choice. He loved his wife and even the craziest idea of hers was sacred to him.

He opened the doors. He entered the cottage slowly, fearing that he will find nothing.

She waited.

She was naked; only silvery, shiny collar on her neck; and it was quite a sight. Young body with large breasts and perfectly round, not too big ass. Her face matched the younger body quite well. She always had a beautiful face, even before Botox shots, and it remained beautiful even in comparison with the body of twenty-some.

"Hi, honey," Yvonne said, showing her long, pointy teeth. "You weren't expecting to see me, right? Oh, you're so funny when you're worrying about everything."

"So it's true. It was possible after all." Walter was happy, but also very surprised.

When the drunk, old Thai witchdoctor approached them during their visit in esoteric shop in San Francisco, Walter could not force himself to believe a word that crazy man said. But he listened. The translator; nice, young Asian-American girl; was

too attractive to let her go away, even if Yvonne was around. When they have moved to a Starbucks next door, Yvonne stopped even noticing her husband staring at the other woman like a pervert. Thai witchdoctor said that he knew what she was searching for in the books displayed in the shop. She wanted to know if head transplant from one ghost to another was possible. He left Walter astounded when he confirmed that it is indeed possible, but only if they've secured a body that lost its head forever and was still semi-alive.

Yvonne obsessed about it for a long time, so she believed without a shade of doubt. She devised a plan. Oliver was a prick, correct, and Mandy was one hell of a bitchy, unlikable match for him. But Oliver's wife was only twenty-two and she had a body of actress or model. Yvonne never cared about immortality. Being immortal can be bothersome after a while. But new, young body? She wanted that badly. She never quite shook off the shock that came with the realization that she is ageing. Plastic surgery was only making the feeling worse. The operations made her body seem increasingly artificial, painfully fake. So Walter and Yvonne befriended Oliver and when the time was right, they've kidnapped the inanimate body of his wife.

"Oh, I've murdered that maintenance worker from Happy Eternity on my way here. He wasn't much of a challenge, dear."

Poor guy, thought Walter. He had no time to enjoy the large amount of money they have transferred to his account for making the ventilation shaft protection system useless.

"Dear, one more thing," Yvonne's voice changed, she sounded a little sad. "Sorry I went in first. You were supposed to be turned before me. I've panicked. I thought they're getting suspicious after your efforts to buy us time 'till sundown. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"No problem, honey," Walter said with a shadow of a wan smile on his lips. "It was all for you, after all. I'm happy for you and I'm glad I've managed to divert their attention for that long. Without the nightfall giving you more power, you wouldn't be able to escape."

"You're so sweet, my knight. You would sacrifice anything for me, right?"

"As always, Yvonne," Walter replied sincerely.

At first he had qualms about being her partner in crime. After all, was youth really enough to kill

someone and to play a trick on the most powerful corporation in the USA? Granted, there was something in it for him. He cherished his pleasures. Spanking the fresh, firm butt was a tempting perspective. When he agreed, Yvonne got so excited that he also started to think that it may actually work. But after few days his skepticism returned, stronger than ever. Even worse, the fear came with it. He was scared about Yvonne's life. Too many odds. Death during escape, not reaching Mandy's body before the sun is up, the whole thing being a delusion of an idiot with senile dementia pretending to be a wizard. As the day of putting the plan into work approached, Walter anxiety grew stronger. He started to read all the publications on Asian folklore and ghosts of Southeast Asia he could find. But simple people of yore that krasue terrorized had were not too interested in possibilities of successful krasue to krasue head transplant. Walter was unable to confirm anything. So when he entered the Happy Eternity Corporation building, he was on the edge of panic attack, nearly unable to keep the act.

Seeing Yvonne standing there, smiling and flaunting her new body, was such a relief.

She had erect nipples and Walter realized that he also was quite ready for action himself for some time.

"Yvonne, darling, I wonder... Would you be interested in, let's put it that way, trying out your new body?" Walter asked, very politely

No response.

Her eyes were red and burning.

"I'm hungry. Yes, I guess I'm starving," she said and her head started to move up.

"I've brought some meat in the trunk," said Walter as he looked through the window on the left. The sun was setting.

"Why bother? Walter, have I mentioned how tasty you look right now. You're a big boy, You know?. A treat."

The tail of slimy internal organs emerged from her neck. Her teeth were shining even in the dim-lighted room.

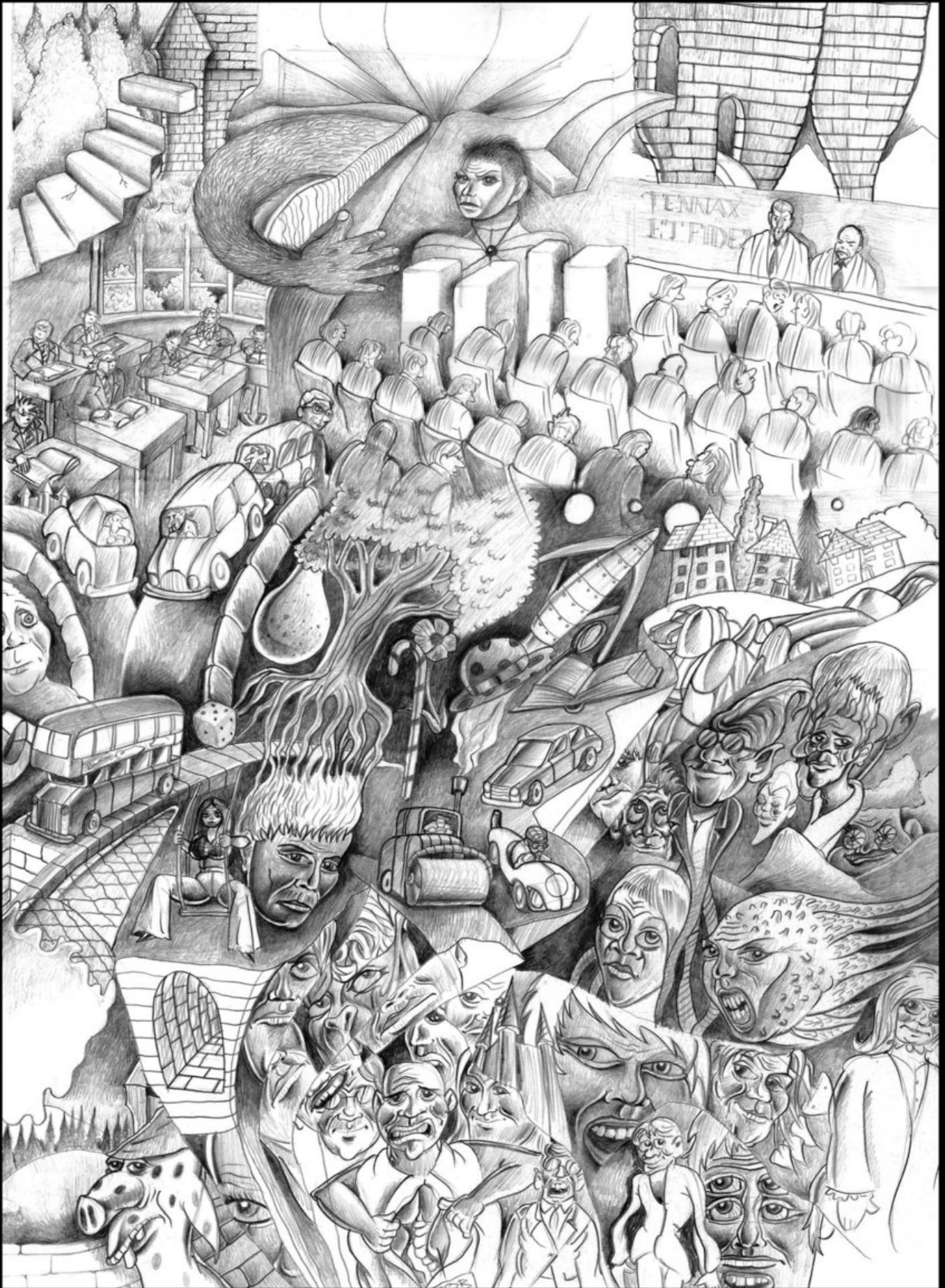
As her head slowly levitated towards him, Walter found that one other thing that he could not predict. Happy Eternity Corporation was not too keen of sharing details on their technology. It never occurred to him that the safety collars may be SO personalized.

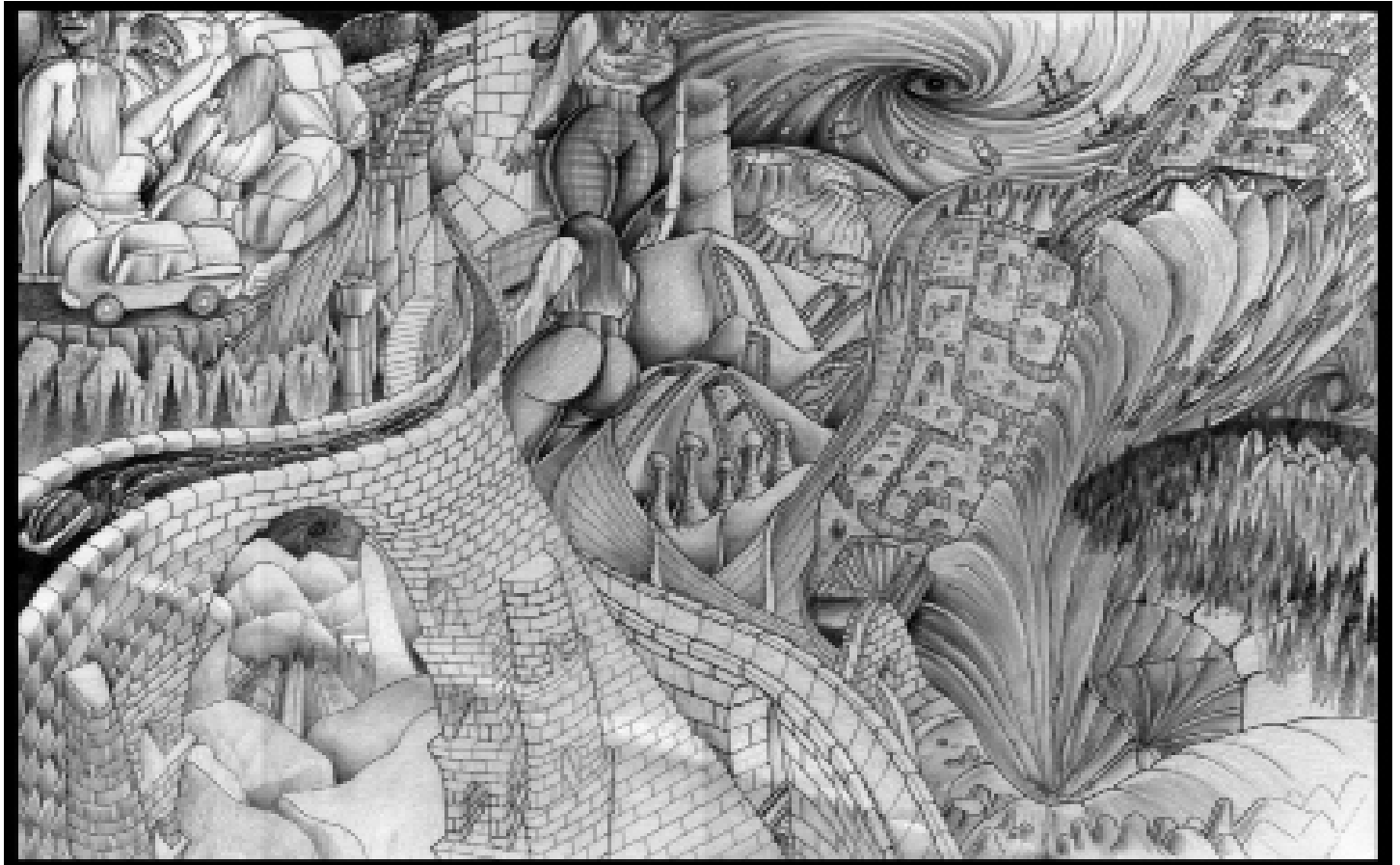
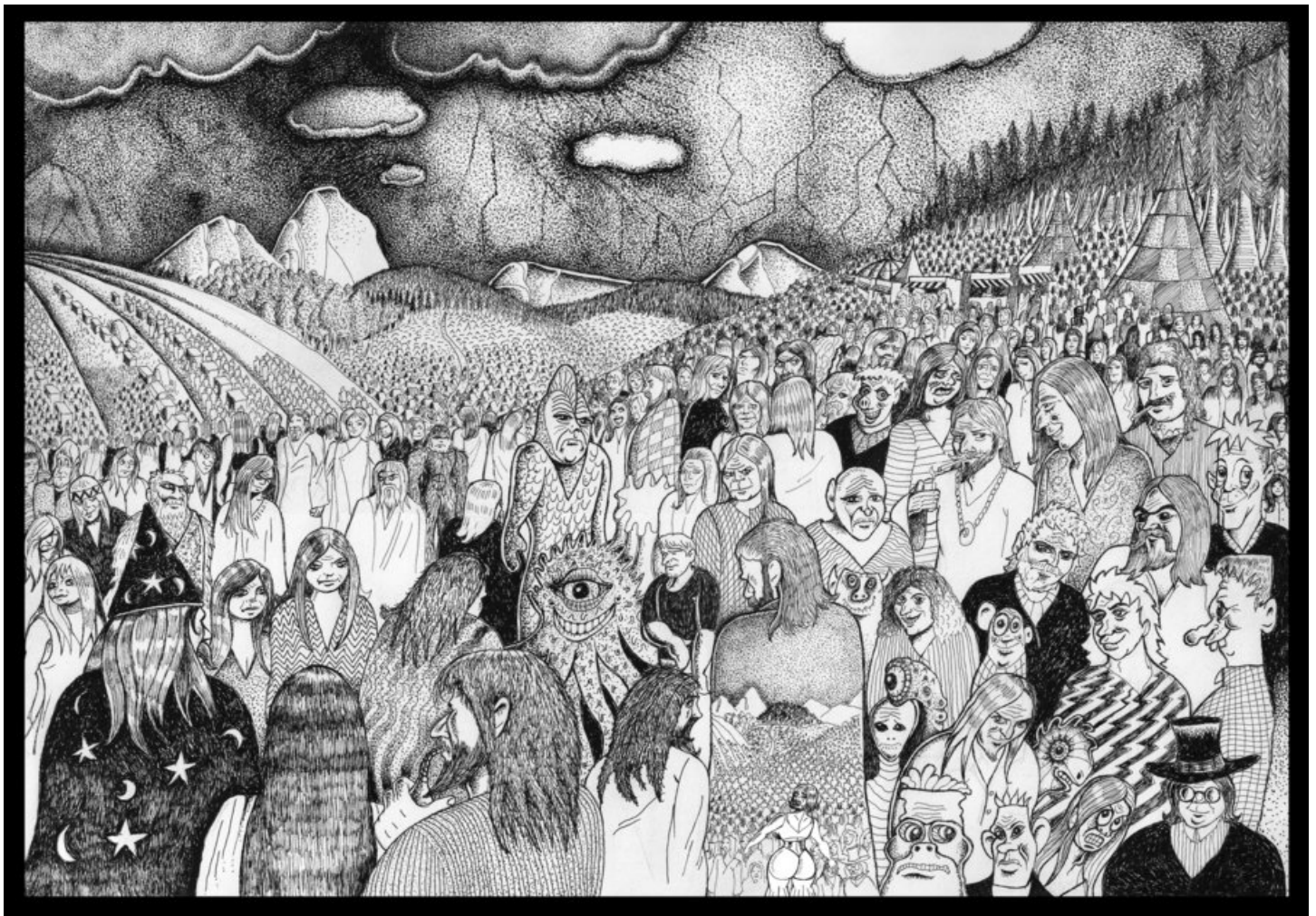
Transplanting the head was indeed a tremendous success. Yvonne remaining Yvonne? Not so much.

Needless to say, Walter was about to discover the cons of having a disembodied head as a wife.



Inside the Vortex by Visionizer







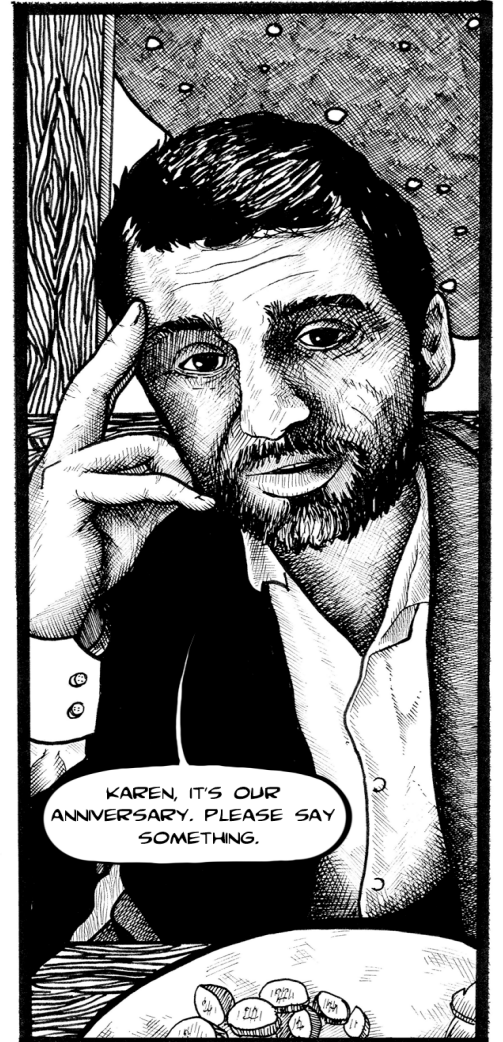




THE WHITE BLANKET

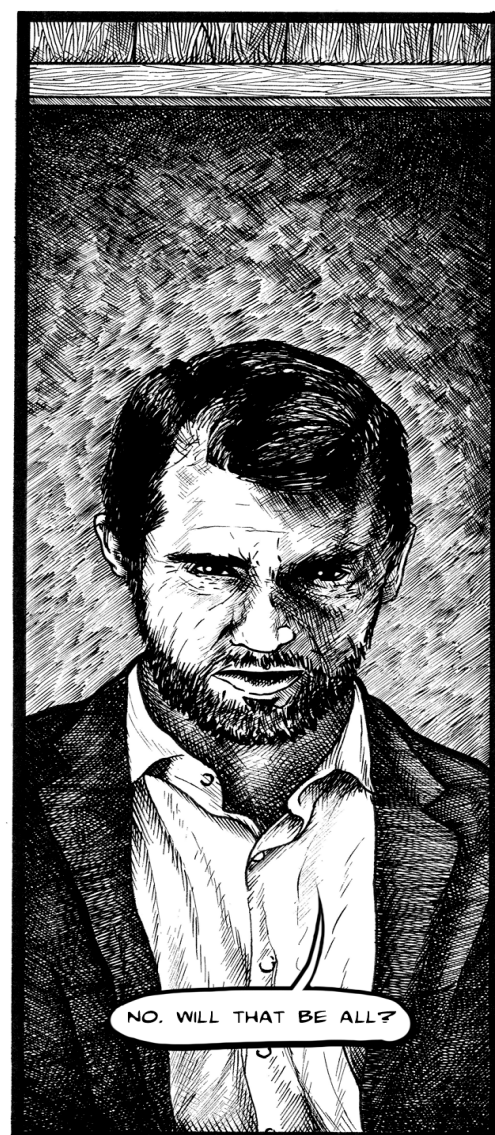
STORY : ALAN HUBBARD ARTWORK : STEPHEN BURGER

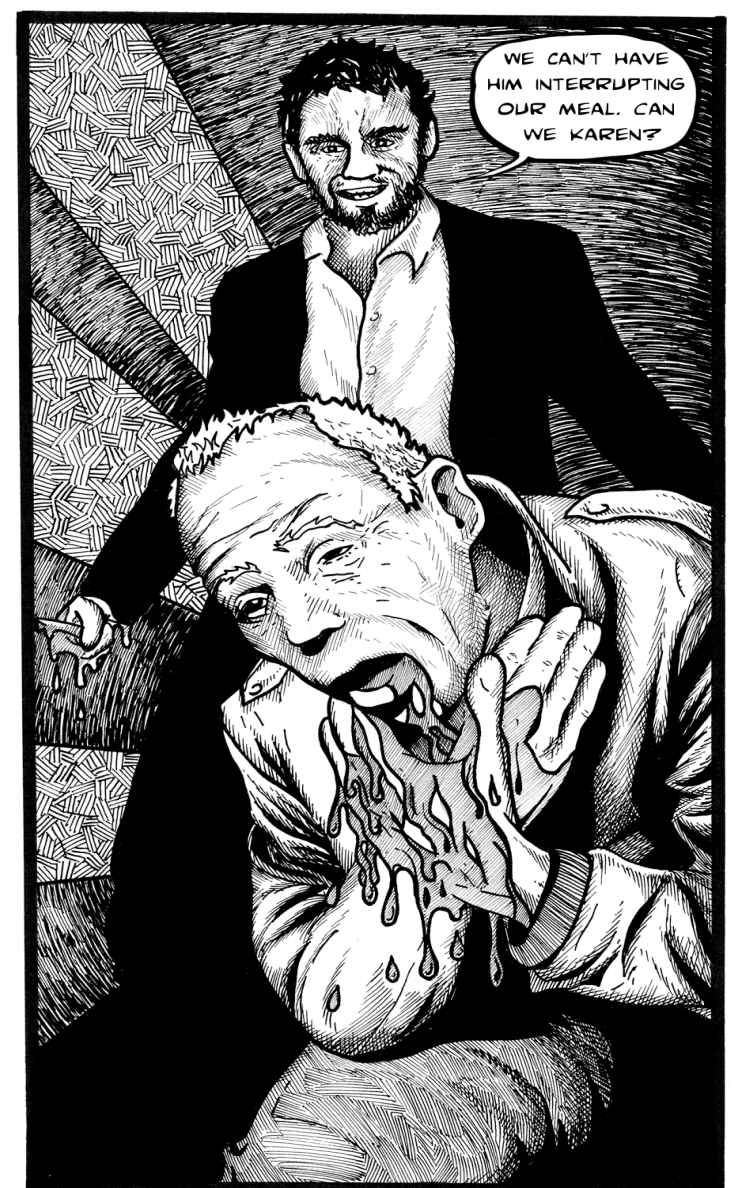
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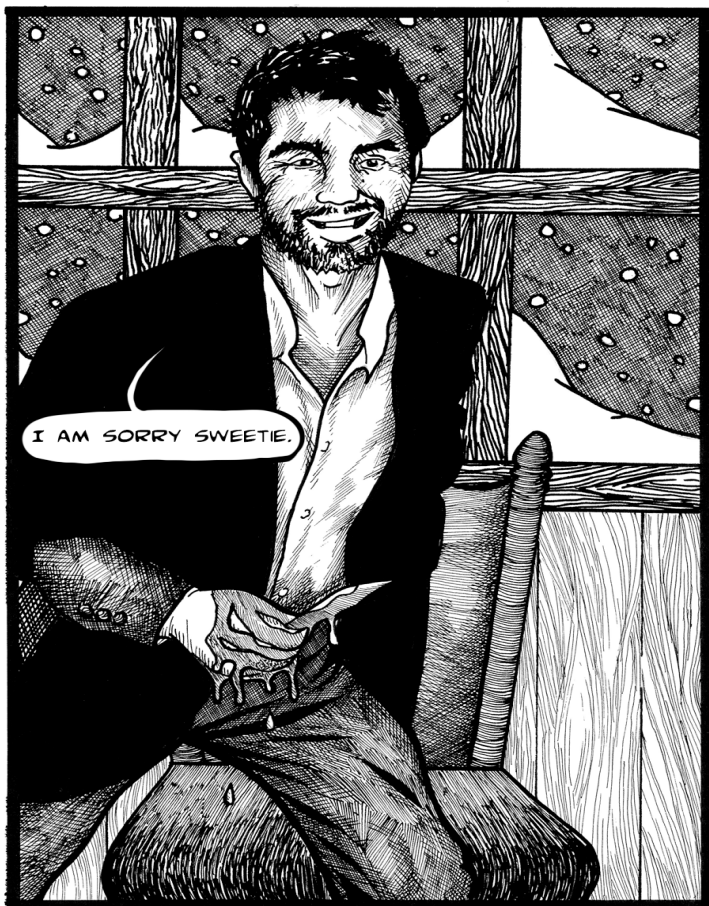
















The Becoming

Brent Abell

Ben stepped out on the fallen hotel wreckage and scanned the horizon. Six years after a rogue regime in the Middle East launched its warheads into Jerusalem; the morning skyline still looked like it burned. He thought back to the news the missiles were approaching the US's eastern seaboard and his school evacuated into the subway tunnels. Overhead, the sky's reddish hue hanging over Boston Harbor reminded him of the mornings he rode his bike to school and play in the park until the sky darkened from blue, to red, and to twilight's purples. For miles, all he gazed out at were the burnt out and decaying husks of civilization.

Without realizing it, he scratched the spot on his shoulder where one of the military doctors gave him a booster shot two days ago. The liquid burned his veins like his heart had begun pumping lava through his system. They told the group of teens the boosters were to help them adapt to the changes in the environment. Ben understood why, food and shelter was quickly becoming more and more scarce in the underground tunnels. Last week, the military put ration policies in effect to stem the tide of their rapidly depleting food stores.

"Hey Ben, I knew I'd find you up here," the red headed girl said taking her place at Ben's side.

"Oh, hey Lacey," he said and nodded to her. He felt his cheeks redden. Since he met her in the shelter two years ago they'd become friends and he'd developed a crush on her.

"Why do you always come out to this place? You know they tell us it's not safe to wander around out here," Lacey whispered and took Ben's hand. She squeezed it tightly and he returned the small form of affection.

The spot on his shoulder twitched and he dropped her hand to scratch it again. "The place where the doctors gave you your shot, does it bother you any? Mine burns and the itching is fucking terrible. I had to force myself to stop messing with it. Here, check this out," he offered and rolled up his shirt sleeve.

A low gasp escaped Lacey's lips. The skin around the injection site looked puffy and red. A blood and pus mixture dripped in yellow and crimson droplets down his arm. Several deep gouges criss-crossed the tender flesh. Something about the spot didn't sit right with her. The place where she got her injections bothered her, but not to the extent it did to Ben.

Quickly, she covered her mouth and muttered, "Oh my Ben. Have you told the meds about it yet? They said the injections were to help us get ready to live up here full time again so we can straighten everything out again, but if there are side effects, you have to tell them!"

"I don't have to tell them shit! If they knew, they'd want to, to...I don't know, experiment on me or something!"

"Aren't they doing that now?" she asked shrugging her shoulders.

He reached over and grabbed her arm. His fingers pressed into her injection site and she winced. She tried to hide the pained expression on her face, but Ben noticed.

"Hurts huh?"

"Look," she said pulling away from him, "nightfall is in a few minutes and they're going to shut the vault doors."

He stared at her for a moment and relented, his sudden angry burst subsiding. Ben stood and watched her head to the checkpoint to reenter the underground. He rushed behind her so they wouldn't get shut outside the thick concrete doors built at the mouths of the subway tunnels that kept the radiation from the languishing citizens below.

Hearing the massive doors drag closed behind him, he felt tired and very, very hungry.

The sensations were the same as the dreams before, Ben's mind felt blank and he moved like he was on the ground. He only reacted to the burning in his gut and the prickling of his skin. His vision blurred, but he continued to shovel the food into his mouth. The stench assaulted his nose, a mix of rotted fruit, dirt, and piss from the refuse systems: but it tasted like honey. Spoiled juices ran down his chin and his tongue slurped it up from his lips, drinking down the rank liquid. Dragging his arm across his face, he stopped when the bristles scratched his cheeks. Slowly, he dropped his arm down and looked at the food he'd been stuffing his face with.

His stomach lurched and he threw down the trash in his fists. Suddenly, revulsion turned his guts inside out and he doubled over. With a quick twitch, he glanced at his arms and stifled back a scream. Thick, coarse, black hair sprouted from his pores. Reaching up, he ran his fingers over the irritated places on his face

and he felt the skins edges pull up from the muscle, Grabbing on to a piece of skin, he ripped it back and his face fell away...

"You look like shit Ben," Lacey noted with her trademark smirk and scratched her shoulder.

"You don't look any better yourself sweetheart," Ben retorted. He studied her work her fingers across her sleeve, trying to rip through the shirt's fabric and tear into the skin beneath. The rash on his arm looked worse when he looked at it when he woke up. It blistered and the coloration reminded him of a lobster fresh from the pot.

"Asshole, you don't tell a girl that! Where are your manners?" she said and playfully punched his arm.

Ben didn't respond directly. His eyes stared blankly out across the dining area where the residents of Boston Shelter A-4 march in to get their morning ration of stale bread and dirty water. The debris floating in the drink reminded him of the fish food he'd give his goldfish when he was a kid. Throwing in the aquarium's top, he watched it float to the bottom and land atop the rainbow colored gravel. The soldiers told them it was safe to drink. He refused at first, but eventually the thirst over took reason and he greedily gulped down the first glass they handed him. Then they approached him about the program and explained his life would be worth living again on the surface.

"You ah, scratching at the arm a little bit?"

Lacey glanced down and noticed the crimson droplets streaming out from under her sleeve. Turning away, Ben grabbed her and spun her back around.

"Having nightmares too? What else aren't you telling me? I thought we had something going," he sneered angrily.

"Yes, I've had terrible nightmares, I think my skin is falling off, and I feel something in my gut that hurts so badly," she yelled and buried her face on Ben's shoulder sobbing.

He patted her head with his hand and caressed her back. Where his fingers ran over the sheer shirt she wore, he felt welts and raised places covering her

entire back. Examining her neck, his blood ran cold. The patch of skin looked blackened and small black spines stuck out from her pores. Instinctively, his hand shot to the scruff of his neck, frantically checking his own flesh.

Just below the skin's surface, his fingertips felt the sharp protrusions below the epidermis. A blazing hot flash rushed through his system and he dropped to his knees.

"Oh my God, Ben!" Lacey shouted before a blood-curdling scream exploded from her lungs and she fell to the floor.

Reaching out to grab her hand, Ben heard the claxon blaring up and down the corridor they were in. Pressure built in his ears and his muscles contracted and flexed involuntarily. Cracking, his knees buckled backward and he shrieked in agony. Fighting through the pain, he rolled his head around to check on Lacey.

Her head flopped to the side and her body jerked around in the throes of a seizure. Rips and tears criss-crossed the flesh on her arms and face. Black ooze from her mouth and something tore free of her cheek and flexed outward. The pleas she made were garbled and he couldn't understand what she was trying to say. Her voice sounded like she had a mouth full of cotton trying to speak underwater.

The alarms died off and the cadence of marching boots echoed down the hallway. Blinking trying to clear his eyesight, he saw a man in a bio-suit kneel next to Lacey and inject something in her arm. Trying to shout at the men, something shredded his bottom lip and wiggled in the air. A sharp point slammed into his shoulder and the burning liquid ran up his arm setting all his nerve endings on fire. His head swam and his twisted reflection in the soldier's helmet was the last thing he saw.

The dreamland sun blazed across the sky as he roamed the wreckage around Fenway Park where he and his father shared their happiest times. The Green Monster's remains lay in a crumbled heap and the massive outfield Coke bottle had fallen forward, resting in the centerfield weeds. Paper and other debris swirled around the silent empty stadium from the breeze blowing in off the harbor. Around him, Ben heard others clicking around and saw movement in the dugouts and the ruined concession stands.

The stale air reeked of decay, but he found the

aroma delicious. Moving across the right field seat, he sniffed around the chipped concrete and licked the faded seats with his tongue. The dirt tasted wonderful and he spied a pile in the corner that looked like popcorn boxes and crushed drink cups. Quickly, he scurried over and reached out to grab the sweet trash.

Grabbing hold, the skin on the back his hand split. His middle two fingers hung limp and folded under the flesh pulling away from his arm. No blood poured from the wounds and the other muscle layer fell from his bones. Turning his head away quickly to avoid looking at his arm, he saw the others in the field.

Trying to vocalize the scream failed. Dropping the trash and bringing his hand up to his face, he shrieked in horror inside his head and left the dream world behind.

Waking up, the words in his ears were muffled. At first he didn't understand everything, but the conversation around him clarified.

"The experiment is a success doctor?"

"Yes, the two subjects were injected with the recombinant DNA has shown the beginning stages of metamorphosis. Soon, you can deploy them to the surface."

"This had better work."

"I assure you, they will help get the surface prepared for us to leave these damn underground hovels."

"Excellent, the president will be...wait, the girl is stirring."

Ben relaxed and the fog flow from his head. The edges of his vision remained blurred and the light above him looked like a prism. He struggled to move his hands so he could wipe his eyes, but he felt them bound to the table he laid on. Squirming around, he noticed his chest was also strapped down.

Focusing as hard as he could, he stared in shock at the where Lacey lay strapped to a table. Her fingertips broke open and dark brown claws slid out of her skin. Two shapes ran around her and frantically tried to tighten the leather straps holding her down. An unholy cry erupted from her lips and they broke apart, onyx mandibles pushing the skin

away. Her head flopped over and faced Ben.

A tear formed at her scalp and cracked the center of her face. Large feelers grew from underneath her hair and extended into the room and waved wildly around. The mandibles opened and closed like scissors and the skin broke free of her face and sloughed off to either side. Her deep amber eyes gazed at him and a vacant look crossed her new insect face. Ben felt his insides rumble and he knew it was only a matter of time now before his final transformation began.

Lacey's arms tugged at the bindings and broke free. Flailing her arms in the air wildly, her arms fell off her body. Large armored appendages flexed with pointed pinchers opening and closing. A wet ripping came from her midsection and her new body rose from the molted human skin remaining on the table. Rolling back with her shoulders, wings unfurled and she flapped them once. Ben cringed at the sound they made in the air.

The two men in the room screamed and she reached out with her pinchers and grabbed the one in the white lab coat. The claw's serrated edges dug in through his coat and tore into his flesh. The white quickly turned red and she jerked her arm hard severing the doctor in half. A crimson spray shot into the air like a geyser and his top half toppled to the ground. Lacey shook his intestines free of her pincher and got to her feet.

The other man stood by the door and pounded on it loudly screaming for someone to open it. Reaching to his holster, he whipped out his pistol and squeezed off three shots into Lacey. The bullets slammed into her thorax and bounced harmlessly to the floor. Pushing down on her thin and barbed legs, she sprang toward the man and buried her mandibles in his neck. The blood showered her head and she drank deep of his life.

Ben heard the familiar sounds of the change emanating from his own body. A cold sweat covered him and the heat in his core rose. Opening his mouth, his jaw dislocated and his face slid backwards from his head. Tearing free from his moral shell, his mind reset to his baser needs. Looking across the room, he saw Lacey drop the soldier's corpse and turn toward him. The only thing his mind recognized was his hunger and his lust.

The two monstrosities scrambled to the middle of the room and embraced. Holding each other, they became aware the temperature rose rapidly. Flames

roared from ceiling vents and the cloth covers on the beds burst into flames. The room filled with the aroma of the dead scientist's bodies smoked and cooked in the heat.

Ben and Lacey's eyes met and something flashed through their new insect minds. A brief remembrance from what seemed like a lifetime ago and a final understanding of their fate.

Beneath their new shells, they felt their own insides boil. Lacey reared back and her abdomen exploded from the expanding internal gasses. Ben rolled on the scorching tiles and crawled toward the door. Climbing over the charred doctor's remains, he reached out to the door and then a low guttural moan escaped his mouth. Underneath his exoskeleton, his flesh ignited and flames exploded through his armor. With one last gasp, he turned back toward Lacey and reach out to her deathly still outstretched arm. Falling to the floor, his pincher landed in hers and he took his last hot, burning breath.

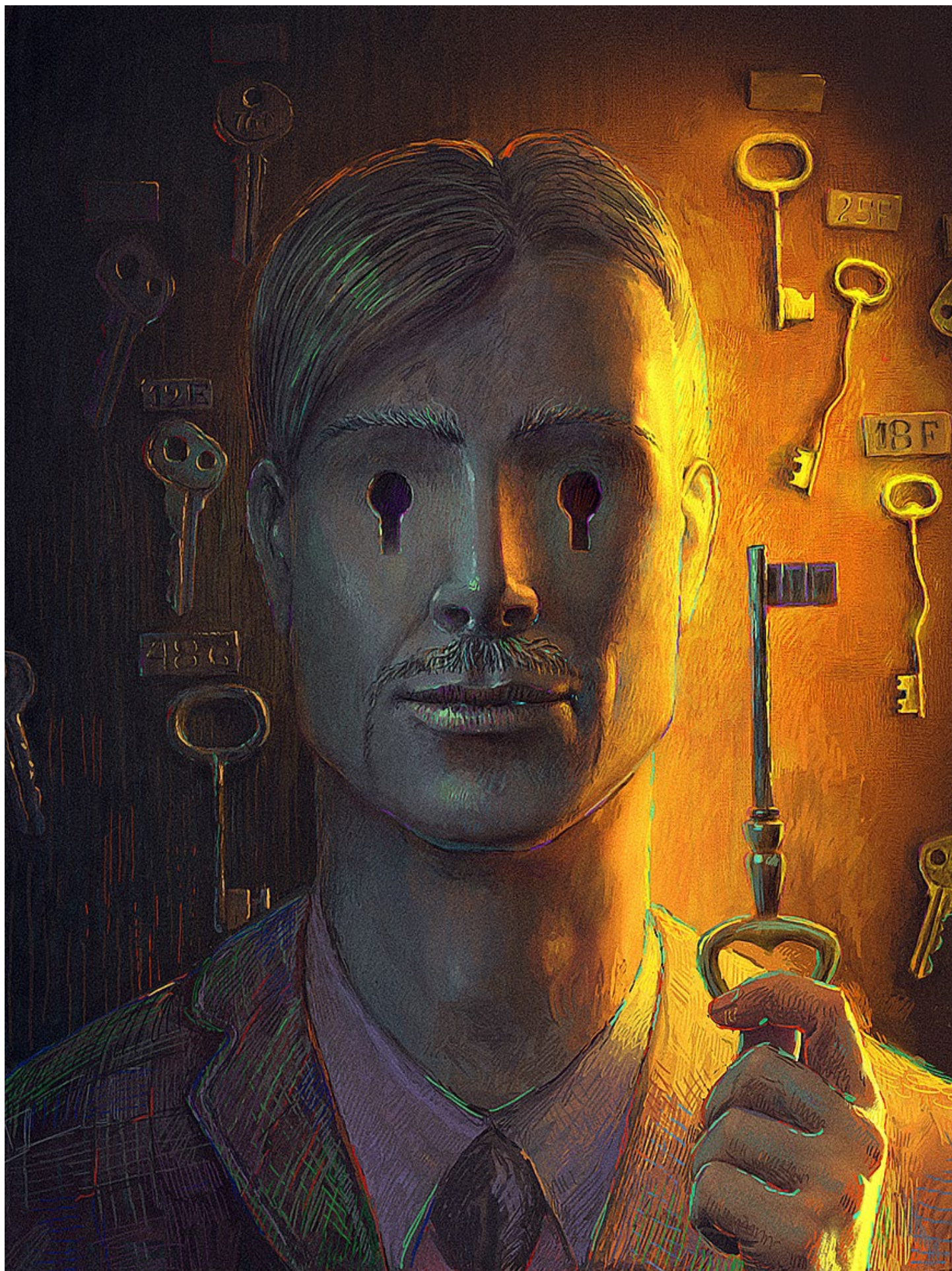
The men stared in the observation window and scribbled down some notes. Inside the room on the other side of the glass, the flames finished consuming the failures. Dying away, the cool down cycle kicked in and the fans blew air in so the clean-up crew could finish eliminating all trace of the experiment.

"What now Dr. Warren?"

"I believe what we are doing is right. If we can perfect the process, combining the cockroach DNA with some of the dead weight around here will allow us to create a workforce for the surface and find food."

"Should we go back to the drawing board?"

"No, find two more for the injections, I believe we are getting close," Dr. Warren noted and closed his notebook. Once his assistant closed the door behind him, he reached down and pulled out a zip drive. Scrolling through the files, he found the details from the president about Operation: Reclamation and began to write out his report.





The Perfect Home

By Joseph J. Patchen

What I can see of the grave is that it is ordinary. It is old: untended and long forgotten, swallowed by scraggly, sharp overgrowth. It is tucked in a jumble of other headstones – some whole, some broken – jutting out of sunken sections of earth, amongst bent and twisted trees, wild grasses and dry, frazzled berry bushes. The vegetation is, of course, as dead as what is planted in the soil below.

No matter the season, short, soft gusts of wind continually wash over these grounds. Each moaning breeze brings the branches and stalks alive, dancing and rattling like marionettes leaving me with a measured uneasiness as to what might lie within.

My wife, who accompanies me, is as stoic as ever. We have been together so long, I can hear her voice singing sweetly in my mind. While the terrain is rough, her tone is soft, caressing my anxiety into calm. She is not fazed in the least by my sense of dread and death.

We cannot simply push through or swipe past the long arms and tentacles that nature and neglect have borne. This is not a newer portion of the cemetery. We have found the original plots. We're in the presence of the dead who staked these grounds almost two centuries ago. To push forward we need the strength of sickles and knives with long, broad sharp blades to hack our way in to make their acquaintance.

Throughout, my wife remains calm. A strong woman, she tells me with just her smile that she is not fazed in the least by these obstacles. Her eyes remind me that those things worth achieving require great toil and effort.

It may be February, but it has yet to snow. My, wouldn't a thin, delicate blanket of white bring warmth and cheer to such a stark and barren scene? I'm sure my darling you would agree. With your love of Valentine's Day, a light glaze of frozen joy would almost bring forth the breath of life. Just like icing on a cake: a sweet layer of decoration. I pray there's still time for the ground to be filled before Cupid draws his bow.

But our trek is not a total loss. We are blessed that the earth has not yet frozen this season. We are blessed

that we may still blend with the soil and its richness, because the winter months have been so mild, our digging can be accomplished with ease.

This portion of the graveyard was built first. It was built on a hill overlooking our town and its modest port. It was built so the founders and elders of this community could, in all perpetuity, watch their creation prosper and evolve.

When my wife was a child she would come here and play amongst the saplings and the stones: darting and dancing about, playing hide and seek with the 'imaginary' friends she made here. As her teens passed into her early twenties, the solitude of this patch gave her the clear contemplation her mind required for her studies. It gave her the peace she needed for reading and pondering the great mysteries offered by life.

It was here, we would picnic during our courtship. It was here, she accepted my first kiss. It was here, she agreed to take my hand in marriage and it was here, where we spent the early days of our matrimony, walking hand in hand, admiring the solitude and the view.

The expanse of ocean just over the town's shoulder has never looked bluer. The sky, even as dusk approaches, has never been clearer and my love's eyes never brighter as we cuddle and spy those below, gleaming like a box full of jewels, all decorated for this most loving of celebrations.

In the calm that is the approaching night, my bride finally rests. Her large brown eyes now close and I lay her down to be swathed in the tall cool grass. With my hands and a small spade I commence my work. Normally, this would be arduous; something I feel I am too old and tired to do, but tonight my heart swells with pride, and with each scoop of soil, my burden grows lighter.

My darling, I know I have been a failure for much of our marriage. I know. You have constantly reminded me. I know you have had to without and, at times, less than that: always to do with less than your friends and family. All the while I have chased ill-conceived dreams and fancies. But I have always truly loved you in the face of your insults. Never have I strayed from our vows. But I do understand that at various points in our life's journey those ethereal badges of honor just weren't sufficient for you.

Every hour of our life together – this has truly weighed on my soul. As I got older, and you reminded me each day of my faults, I learned to sleep less and

concentrate on winning you more.

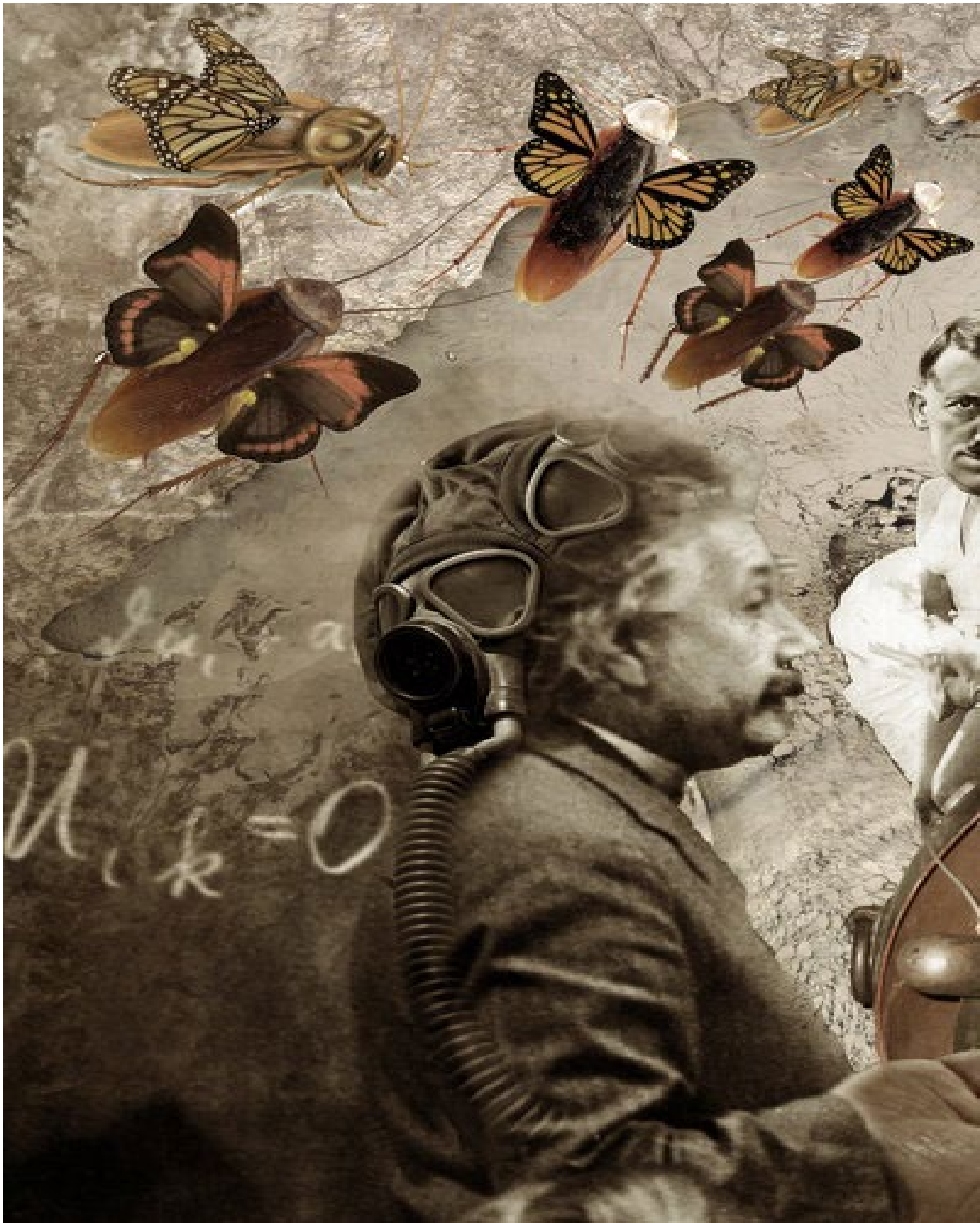
My darling, for most of our marriage I have feared your birthday, our anniversary, Christmas. I would be in terror that whatever gift I gave you would meet with derision – and each and every one did.

But tonight my dear wife, for you, on Valentine's Day, with all my love and in honor of the long and tedious marriage that I have inflicted upon you, I can finally give you something you love.

It has been a long day and you have slept so soundly. When you finally awake my dear, you will have the solitude you have always craved, and the oneness you have been praying for since the day of our matrimony – six feet under this spot. The spot that you have always called your perfect home.



A Genius and his Genitals







My Perfect Darkness

By Tiffany Pennywell

When I was younger my mother didn't love me and my father didn't care. In school I was a freak. The girl, who wore dark clothing, listened to the "devil's" music and always ate alone.

At my lowest darkest point I never gave up. I could feel it in my bones that there was someone out there for me. Someone who could make me feel alive, warm and loved.

On dark nights I loved to stroll amongst the cemetery rose garden. The irony of the life among the tombs always brought a smile upon my lips. But this night felt different. The night itself felt alive. As the insects played their nighttime melody I couldn't help but to twirl around in the flowers. I let the fragrance of the roses wash over my swaying body.

The night and I were so attuned that I did not hear you approach. I didn't even sense you until you were upon me.

When I turned around and beheld your figure I was already taken in. You were dark, your eyes were bright and your lips were curled in a hungry snarl.

My heart started to pound, I began to sweat. My body wanted me to retreat. I couldn't deny the danger of the situation. You could easily take me.

And as if to prove that you grabbed my hair and forced my face to yours. Bruising my lips with your urgency while you let go of a guttural moan. As I began to respond you pushed your tongue through my lips, which sent my body into paralysis.

I felt each of my arms become dead weights to my side. And my legs lost all feeling. If I wanted I couldn't run away. But why would I deny myself the heat and pleasure when I had been denied so long?

Suddenly you grasped both of my shoulders sending a sharp pain through the muscles. I cried in pain but you just pushed me into a nearby oak. With your left hand you scooped up both of mine and forced my arms above my head. You then grabbed my left breast with your right hand and pushed up to watch my breast swell.

Amongst the pain the ache among my womanhood grew. I wanted to be taken by you anyway you wanted. I was your willing victim. Your cornered prey.

I looked up into your eyes to try and convey this but you quickly spat in my face and called me your whore. Then grabbed my top and ripped it off me leaving small trails of blood behind.

You stood back a bit and watched your handiwork flow. Until you couldn't take it any longer and let your tongue take over. You traced the scratches gently at first making sure not to leave a drop and when you were done you were not satisfied and bit down hard until I gave up more.

As I moaned and squirmed in place your hand found my erect nipple and began to alternately twirl and flick it vigorously. And though lost in the moment I wondered how you still had me pinned and still had me cupped while this was being done.

I looked up and around to find your hands everywhere. Eight in total was what I counted and I couldn't help but scream.

Your laugh vibrated through the air around us as you started to move against me. You were releasing a string to make sure I stayed securely in place. All the while grinding into me letting me feel your erection.

Soon everything on my body was covered except my head. You proceeded to climb the tree from which you hung suspended by your string. Then you pulled down your pants, released your cock and forced it deep inside my mouth.

I gasped and gagged as your erection choked the back of my throat. Your thrust was so hard it banged the back of my head against the tree. And when I thought I would black out I felt your hot cum release and I gagged more as you left your penis inside to force me to swallow.

After your last twitch you climbed down and placed your feet upon the ground. I looked into your eyes and found a cluster of darkness looking back at me. But no matter the deformation I still wanted you.

You pushed your body against mine, dragged a hand across my face and all the while ripped the webbing from my body. Each clump of sticky web pulled reluctantly from my body causing each pull and tug to leave red marks all over me.

Then all at once when you were done your hands took over me. One found my soaked panties and ripped them off as another found its way into my wet vagina.

Two hands grabbed my breast and began to slap them back and forth. Another hand pulled me from the tree as one found my other hole and forced its way deep inside. And as you looked upon the scene before you in your hand you held your cock as you masturbated vigorously.

I screamed and screamed through the pain bestowed upon me but I did not want it to end. Never had I had such attention given to me. I was surrounded in your arms, all eyes were on me and such pleasure my body never enjoyed. And as I came while blood trailed down my thighs I knew in my heart it was you I'd waited for all these years.





Transed-Oceanic

Michael C. Keith

*Yes, in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We more millions live alone.*

— Matthew Arnold

Renowned gerontologist and longevity expert Dr. Morley Brittany had spent most of his career searching for a remedy to aging. The focus of his research was a process known as trans-differentiation, wherein a *Turritopsis nutricula*—a hydrozoan jellyfish—was capable of re-growing itself endlessly, thus defying extinction. It was on the basis of this singular natural phenomenon that he had theorized that a cell from the species might be injected into another aquatic form to prolong its life. His hypothesis proved to be accurate.

For two years, Morley had introduced *Turritopsis* cells into a vast array of ocean denizens and found that the majority ceased to age. They had been Transed, to use the term Dr. Brittany had coined. His work excited his colleagues, who were eager to see what would happen when a jellyfish cytoplasm was given to a primate. They were no more eager than he was since he believed he had discovered the fountain of youth. These were heady days for the research physician, and he was intoxicated by the potential value of his work to benefit humanity as well as his reputation. A Nobel Prize was just one of many things he dreamed might be his.

As Morley was about to take his experiments to the next level, his world was turned upside down with a diagnosis of Stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer.

“Two to three months, Morley. I’m very sorry. There’s really not much we can do other than provide palliative care. I know you know that.”

His longtime friend and prominent oncologist, Larry Cunningham, delivered the devastating news.

"Yes, I'm aware of the prognosis for this, but I can't believe it. I know, denial comes first, but, shit, this can't really be happening to me," replied Morley. "I still feel great . . . well close to it. No one in my family has ever even had cancer, let alone this killer."

"Wish the hell I could do something, but this is one frigging late stage cancer that is nearly impossible to curtail. What do you want to do, Morley?"

"Do I get a choice? If so, I'd like to live. Of all the goddamn times for this to happen to me! I'm right on the verge . . . Look, I need to get out of here, Larry," said Morley, springing to his feet and all but dashing from Cunningham's office.

Morley sat in his car fighting the urge to drive off the fourth floor landing of the medical building's parking garage. Get it over quick, he figured, beginning to hyperventilate. Why stick around for what's ahead? A hundred frantic thoughts crowded his mind as he drove home. It was when he turned into his driveway that an idea struck him that instantly lifted his mood. I could be Transed. Reverse the path of the malignant cells. It could work. What do I have to lose? Morley put his car in reverse and drove directly to his lab.

Shortly after his staff left for the day, Morley injected himself with a hyper-dose of the sea phylum's T-cells. Here goes everything. Over the next week, he continued with the injections with no discernable side-effects. However, halfway through the second week of self-administered treatment he noticed a peculiar growth on his lower calf. At first he thought the one-inch excrescence was a thick follicle but on closer examination he discovered it moved. Cestoidea, he wondered?

When he removed it, he felt a sharp pain shoot through his leg to his abdomen. Jesus, it's deep inside.

"A jellyfish tentacle?" he muttered, staring into a microscope. How the hell can that be? No, that's impossible. Just couldn't happen . . . could it? he pondered.

Morley was relieved when no further growths appeared on his body over the next few days. After a month, the slight abdominal discomfort he had experienced prior to being diagnosed with cancer had disappeared. In fact, he never felt better. Is it gone? Did it work? he wondered. Let's find out. Morley booked further tests despite his doctor's skepticism.

"Really not necessary, Morley. You were gone over with a fine toothed-comb. In fact, I had the results

rechecked by Dana Farber, and they confirmed everything we did. I'm glad you're feeling good, but that is often how it goes with this damn thing."

"I want an EUS and some more imaging, Larry. Look I'm not questioning your knowledge. I have the highest regard for you. It's just that something has happened . . ."

"Happened? Jesus, you didn't experiment on yourself with the jellyfish cells . . ."

"Just run the tests, okay? I'll pay for the damn things myself."

"Fine, but if you're experimenting on yourself, you're violating ethics and protocol. You know that."

"What does someone with late stage pancreatic cancer have to lose, Larry? Stop acting idiotic. C'mon, schedule the tests, for Chris sakes!"

"Take it easy. We'll do it at two this afternoon, but you're shooting in the dark, Morley, and you're in for more disappointment. Jellyfish cells are no match for aggressive pancreatic cancer cells."

"Humor me, Larry."

"This isn't a bit funny. If you've been using yourself as a guinea pig, you'll be in deep trouble with the feds and med board."

"And if it worked? What then? Will they take my license away for discovering a remedy for one of the most devastating diseases in existence? I don't think so. See you later, Larry. I have to go visit my miraculous little medusas."

While his staff was at lunch, Morley injected himself with one last blast of T-cells confident in their ability to cure him.

"Amazing!" blurted Larry, reviewing the results of Morley's tests. "This is really extraordinary."

"I knew it worked, but I never thought I'd be the first trial subject. That turns out to be the frosting on the cake. Physician, heal they self . . . and I did!"

"Now what are you going to do, Morley?"

"On that I need your help."

"How?"

"Patients . . . Cancer patients. I need to verify the results on more patients. Late staggers are the best."

"And you want me to provide you with some, right? Well, what you do to yourself is one thing, Morley, but anything further needs proper approval before it can be tested on actual patients."

"Oh, I'm not an "actual" patient? Shit, Larry. It works. How many more people will die before the FDA gives the go ahead with it?"

Little Margie Caufield, thought Dr. Cunningham. She's so close to the end. This could save her. "Well, there's this young girl, only twelve, who has very late stage lymphoblastic leukemia, but . . ."

"But, what, Larry? Let's save her life."

"But this is not right, Morley. You know that."

"So you're just going to let her die, even though this could, no, this will save her?"

"You're playing God, Morley."

"Oh, don't give me that cliché crap, Larry! This is about saving a life when you now have the means to do so."

"Yeah, and when they find out we're doing this, we'll be done . . . careers over. This violates every rule out there."

"How many terminal patients do you have, Larry?"

"Huh?"

"How many patients in your practice have cancer?"

"They all do, I'm an oncologist. That's the kind of patients I have."

"So how many?"

"I don't know, maybe a hundred."

"No wonder you drive a Porsche Carrera GT. I went into the wrong field."

"C'mon, Morley. This is crazy. I'm glad you're in remission, but what you're proposing is patently illegal."

"So you're just going to let all your patients die? Think about it. When we show the medical community and the world that one hundred cancer patients were cured by my method, they'll be astounded and grateful. You think they're going to prosecute us for finding a cure to the most dreaded disease of our time? Jesus, our names will be up there

with Salk, Kocher, and Banting. We're going to worry about the rules when we have the chance to change the world for the better?"

"I don't know, Morley . . ."

"C'mon, let's give your patients back their lives, Larry. How many thousands, millions, of people could be saved by this? This is a remarkable opportunity to do something incredible. It's an obvious decision."

It took more convincing but eventually Dr. Cunningham was on board with Morley's plan. Over the next several weeks, they injected jellyfish T-cells into dozens of patients, who were told they were a part of a very promising new trial that could reverse their cancers.

The initial batch of patient tests taken a month into treatment showed the efficacy of Morley's nostrum. After six months, all of Dr. Cunningham's cancer patients were shown to be free of the disease, although Morley had noticed the same kind of growth he had removed from his calf on two of Cunningham's patients. They had not seemed to take notice, and Morley did not raise the issue fearing Cunningham would want to stop the trial.

"We go public now. I've prepared an overview of our work, and we'll call a news conference, inviting all of your patients to bear testimony," said Morley.

"Maybe we should go slowly. We could get a few noted oncologists to validate our results. It would give us more credibility and mitigate the wrath of the state medical board," replied Cunningham, sounding very tentative.

"Nonsense, we'll make our discovery known to the world in a couple weeks. It will be an auspicious occasion for us, Larry. Stop looking so glum. Do you know what we've done?"

"Yes, I do. Okay, I guess you're right. Two weeks," said Larry, forcing a smile.

They sent out a press release to major news media indicating the time and place for an important news conference that would report "a landmark medical break through." The details were deliberately left vague to arouse curiosity and entice attendance. All of the "Jellies," as Morley came to affectionately call the recipients of the Turrutopsis cells, agreed to participate in the great event. Thanks to their loyalty to and respect for the two doctors who had seemingly cured them of their dreaded maladies, they were more than happy to cooperate.

Just two days before the scheduled news conference, Morley discovered that he was not alone in another side effect—an insatiable urge to consume small fish and larvae. Nearly all of his patients had contacted him about their similar unusual appetites. Morley assured them that it was just a passing side-effect of their treatment, but secretly he wondered if more bizarre changes were ahead for those now carrying substantial amounts of jellyfish T-cells in their bodies.

* * *

It fell to Larry Cunningham to gather the media at the designated time for the milestone announcement. But on the morning of the event he was beginning to experience extreme anxiety. It was not because he feared the likely consequences stemming from the news of their unauthorized actions. Despite numerous attempts, he had been unable to contact Morley or any of the other infected cancer patients.

Less than an hour before the scheduled press conference, a television news update regarding a bizarre incident caught Cunningham’s attention. He turned up the sound to hear the newscaster say

There are reports of several people being found paralyzed along the route that leads to Carson Beach. Reporter Steve Evans files this story:

Brian, at least thirteen people were apparently stung by what one spectator described as monster-like creatures with long stringy feelers. Beach resident Kyle Littleton was on his deck overlooking the ocean when he he saw something quite extraordinary. Mr. Littleton, please tell us about it.

“Must have been a hundred of these gigantic jellyfish things crawling across the sand toward the water. Never saw anything like it. They just kept coming.

All following this one transparent blob like it was their leader. Then they were gone into the ocean. But if that’s not weird enough they made this strange sound . . . kind of like singing or humming. They seemed happy. If that makes any sense.”

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The River Gives Life

by Christopher Boyle

The river calls to me. She is strong. At least one person is taken by her a year, usually more. We know they were taken by her and not the gangs because she spits the bodies back onto her banks. When the gangs take someone the bodies turn up cut in bad ways, or don't turn up at all. Most people are more afraid of the gangs than the river, but I think they're wrong.

The gangs need the river, but she doesn't need them. Today when I was walking home two older boys started to follow behind me, so after a ways I ran. I took every shortcut and alleyway I knew. Taking the wrong one could have just landed me in more trouble. I got away. I don't think about why they were chasing me, maybe just to steal, but maybe worse. It doesn't matter all that much.

I like to sit and watch the river. Sometimes I'm able to steal some liquor or cigarettes and I stay down there all night, but then I miss dinner and risk a beating if the old man gets pissed. He is afraid of the gangs, but he is also afraid of the river, and wouldn't go as close as I do. Her water looks black. Light only breaks through where the water grows rough, reaching from the surface towards the air. Her banks are stony, but covered in moss and life.

Once while sitting by her banks I saw some men dump a body into her waters. Almost like a sacrifice. The river gives life, but she takes it too, even the gangsters respect her power. I once read that back in the old days kings believed they took their power from the gods, and gave them sacrifices of life. Some even claimed to become children of gods, like they had taken their power into themselves. How long since the river has had a god's name?

There is a school here, but they don't usually teach what I want to know, only language and mathematics. It's a mean place. Once I was caught smoking by a teacher who hit me across the face and stole my cigarettes. I saw him smoking one of them that same day. When I have cigarettes I still try to find somewhere to smoke at lunch.

The old man works at the oil drill sometimes, and steals cars sometimes. When he does this he has to give a cut of what he makes to the gangs. He gets mad about this, but never too loudly. I think he may have killed one of my brothers. I have never told anyone this, though. No one ever asked.

Sometimes when I watch the river I imagine where she meets the sea. It's a place I've never been before, but can picture well. I wonder if I might move there someday. After I got away from the two older boys I found a litter of puppies in an alley. I didn't see their mother.

The sun never shines very brightly here, and it's often wet. It snows in the winter, but the river never freezes over. Night times can be cold, especially when I spend them by the banks. I don't mind, though. I know a place where it's hidden, where I can build a small fire.

We live in a city, but it's nothing like the capitol. That is where the old man goes sometimes to steal cars. I haven't been there too many times, but I can usually get away with lifting things from around here without

getting a beating. Last week a classmate was beaten to death by a shopkeeper when he was caught stealing. Even though it was an accident, the boy's father beat the shopkeeper, and was himself beaten to death by the police. I didn't know the boy that well.

I have vodka today, and a half-pack of cigarettes, so I'm out by the river again tonight. I'm not alone; there is a boy with me. Sometimes he will steal for me if I do things for him. After, before the sun is down, we drink some and go down to the river, and he reaches for my hand. I smile, and I feel it just barely touching my eyes.

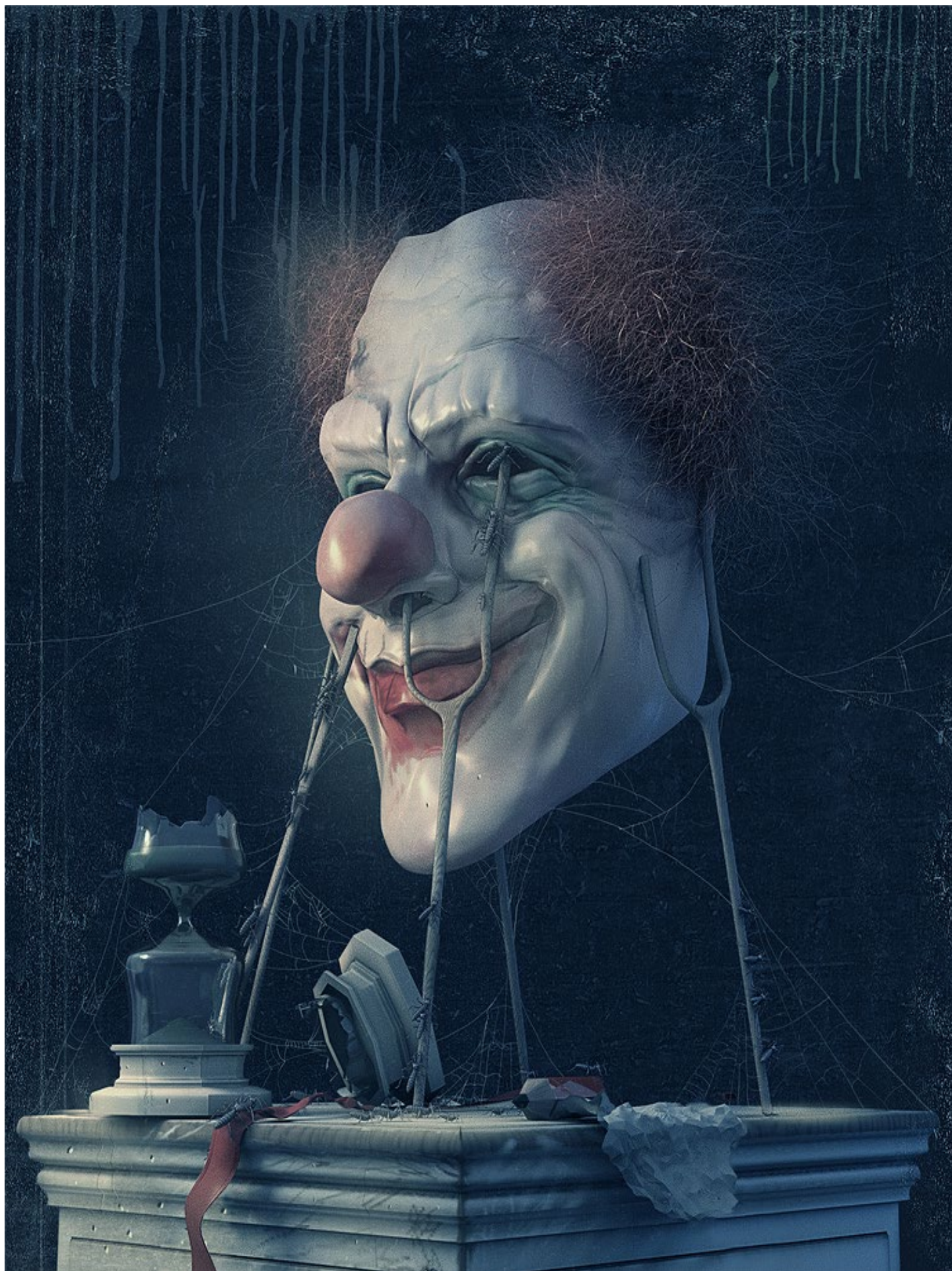
We share a cigarette, one of his, not one of mine. The vodka he stole. He won't stay long after dark, like the old man the river makes him nervous. It's fine by me, I can finish the vodka alone. The puppies make noise from inside the bucket, climbing over one another. It will be dark in maybe an hour.

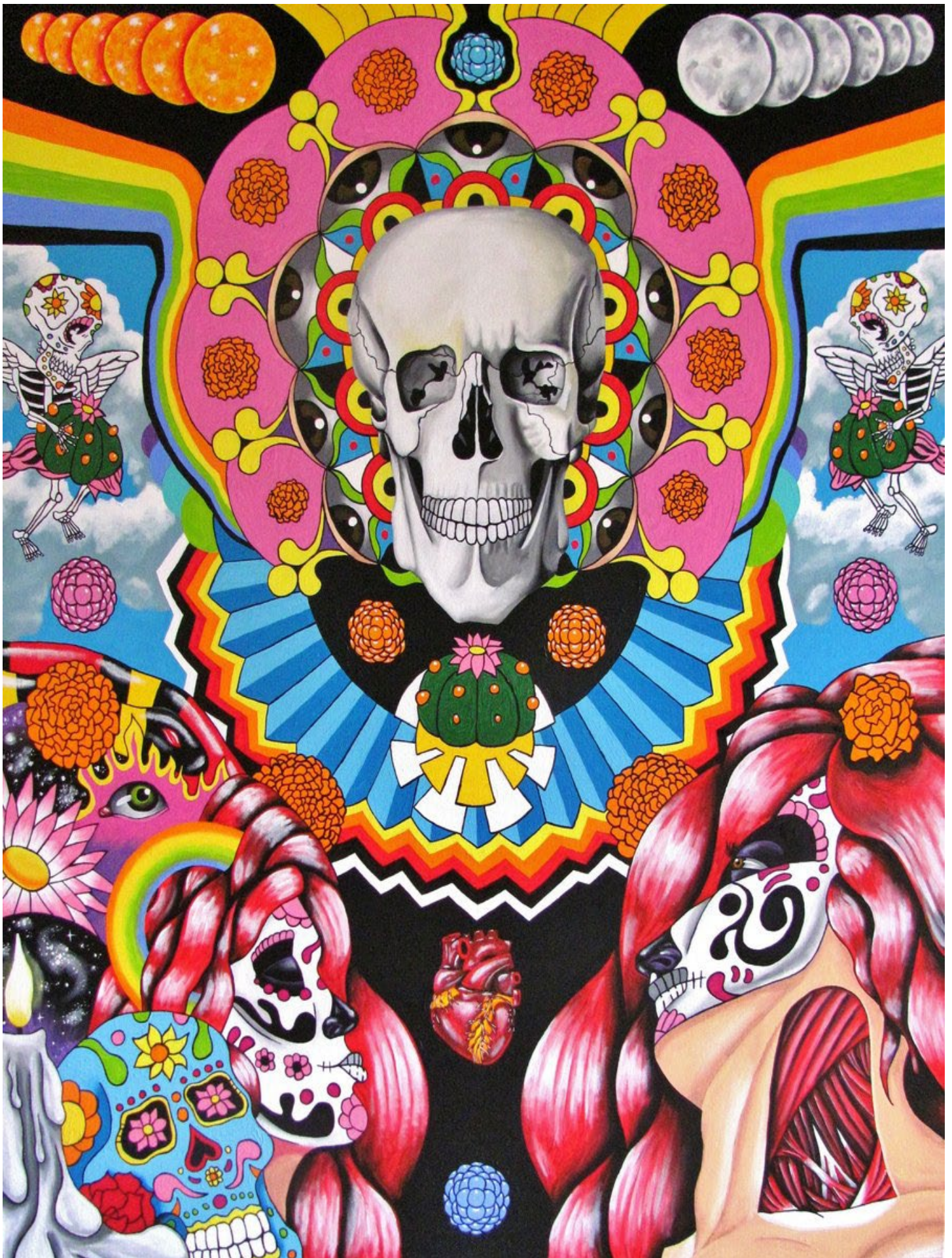
The boy has a video camera. I don't know where he got it, but it's digital. From the capitol, I would have to guess. I don't really know that much about him, no more than he knows about me. He stands behind me, taping.

The puppy doesn't squirm much, only shivers in my hand. I can feel fragile warmth deep within its small body. I don't hesitate before I throw it, I just do. I don't know what it feels when it's in the air, but I try to imagine. It disappears into the black water completely. The boy keeps taping. In the bucket the puppies keep crawling over each other.

I don't pause; just keep picking them out of the bucket and tossing them into the water, watching them sail through the air. When I am done the boy asks me to do the thing that he likes for him again, and I do. He leaves me the rest of the vodka and gives me one of his cigarettes. I put it into my half-empty pack upside down, so I can tell it apart from the others. My stomach growls, so I take a drink of the vodka.

I don't know how much longer I will sit by the river, maybe all night this time. It's cold, but I can hardly feel it. The sun has set, but I can see no stars, only the low-hanging clouds lit weakly by electric lights and kerosene lamps that shine through windows here and there. I sip the vodka again, hoping for a little warmth, and light one of my cigarettes. From below me I can hear the river.





Off the Grid

Devvon Dettra

"I've often wondered if people went crazy or if they always a little off. Were they born psychotic or did they snap. Are you born with it or do normal people go crazy because of life? That's the big question. If we are all at risk all the time.....that was a scary thought. An idea easier to avoid than seriously consider. If everyone's at risk the world suddenly becomes a very dangerous place. Your mind becomes a very dangerous place."

The shrink across from me nodded without looking up. I wasn't sure he was even listening but I took a breath and continued.

"The subject always interested me on a philosophical level. There is still so much we don't know about our own minds. The possibilities were endless but the certainties were few. I finally decided it was one of those things that I would never know the answer to. One of the unexplained parts of life that you just quit thinking about, like religion, Stonehenge, ghosts or.....whatever. Then I went crazy."

"I appreciate your openness Mr. Stephenson, but we don't know that you have a mental illness. Mental illness being the term we prefer to use." The shrink said with a forced geniality. Attempting the good cop routine but failing.

"Okay, I will try your term Cheech," I said laughing. I laughed all the time now, uncontrollably, and for no reason.

"I will ask you to call me Dr. Harding if you could," He said stiffly. He seemed pedantic and scholarly, as I'm sure most shrinks do. He peered over wire rimmed glasses occasionally, but his focus was primarily on his notepad where he constantly scribbled. The scribbling would make most people nervous, but after what I had been through, his mouse like scribbling seemed insignificant.

"Okay have it your way. Just like Burger King," I said laughing again.

"Why don't you tell me why you think you have a mental illness Mr. Stephenson." Dr. Harding sat in a leather chair across from me, his legs crossed holding the notepad. Stacks of books lined the maroon walls behind him making the room to resemble a library more than an office.

"Think? Hell I know! You wouldn't believe what has happened to me this last week, but it was unavoidable. I saved people's lives! I'm a hero!" I was serious about this but it sounded funny coming out of my mouth and the laughter started again. When I had it under control I started again, "Now that I have saved everyone around me, I need locked up. I can't save everyone and the fear is weighing heavy. Who do I look like Superman? Actually I'd rather be batman, he's rich as hell."

"Who are you saving Mr. Stephenson?"

“Devin, call me Devin. Or Batman, whichever. Just don’t tell anyone my true identity,” I coyly whispered. Damn I’m hilarious now!

The shrink sighed, “Okay Devin, who are you saving?”

“Everyone! Your all being overrun and you don’t even know it. The Viet Cong are coming through the wires!” I screamed at the top of my lungs before bursting into laughter again. “We’re off the grid man!”

The shrink looked at me coldly, he clearly didn’t have my sense of humor. Then again maybe he wasn’t crazy like me. Oops, sorry, mentally ill.

“Why don’t we start from the beginning, and you can tell me everything that happened last week. Would that be okay?” The shrink was the good cop again, still no sense of humor, but playing nice for the moment. Maybe we could have a play date someday I thought and smiled.

I squirmed to get comfortable on the couch. On TV these couches always seemed so warm and inviting, but now that I was laying on one my opinion changed. The posh velvet gave my arms a weird sensation and it made crackling noises when I moved. I finally settled into a spot that suited me and looked towards the ceiling

“Okay Doc, I’ll tell you all about it.”

II

“It started two nights ago. I had been under a lot of stress since the baby was born, and hadn’t been sleeping well. That night I was so tired that I couldn’t sleep. Have you even been so tired that you couldn’t sleep? It sounds stupid but it happens, it really does.”

“I laid in bed that night, and the more I tried to sleep, the more awake I felt. First the light from the TV Was bothering me, flickering against my closed eyelids and driving me crazy. I could see little figures in my dark vision every time the colors changed on the screen so I turned it off. Then I couldn’t help but see the alarm clock’s green lights flashing in the dark. Even when I closed my eyes I could see it flashing.....2:41.....2:42.....2:43. It drove me fucking nuts!”

“Calm down Mr. St-....Devin. Please go on.”

“Okay, well I finally went downstairs to sleep on the couch. On my way down the stairs I tripped over a toy the kids left out, Mary is always bitching at them for that, and it set off noises and lights. Sounded like a damn carnival on my staircase but I ignored it and got my bed on the couch ready. I grabbed a blanket and laid down, didn’t turn the television or lights on, just laid down. It didn’t matter.”

“The clock on the wall, the DVD lights, the thermostat! There were electronics all over the place, they were driving me crazy! I stayed up all night, my eyes burning, and my head-splitting with the worst migraine of my life. “

“I watched the sun come up for the first time in years. Mary got up and left for work, taking the kids to school, and I stayed on the couch.”

“After she left I tried to sleep again, but I couldn’t. The computer stared at me, trying to trick me! Showing images of warm beaches, and palm trees! Trying to entice me to get on it. That’s when I realized what was happening.

“And what was that Devin?” The shrink asked.

“They were all trying to kill me. I could see it on their smug screens. They were toying with me, letting me drive myself crazy, begging me to do something stupid.”

“So what did you do?”

“I smashed the computer to begin with.”

“Why did you chose the computer?”

“I told you it was staring me down! Are you even listening? It was me or it, 21st century Darwinism. You should understand that being a quack and all.” I laughed again, the shrink just scribbled on his notepad.

“Okay then what?”

“I went through the house, tearing every electrical wire out of the wall before piling it in the back yard. When I finished, I covered it in tree branches and gasoline and lit it on fire so it would never come back.”

“Do you think these are the acts of a sane man Devin?”

“Of course they are! What is more sane than survival?”

"Were they really going to kill you though," the shrink asked me in a condescending tone.

"How do you think so many people die texting? It's the electronics man! They're everywhere and they power everything."

"How would they have killed you?"

"It's hard to tell, they are capable of so much. They are electric, which brings forth all kinds of power, then they have control of everything from your medical and financial records to what porn you watch."

"Uh huh," the shrink replied

"Don't get all Freudian on me doc, just saying." I thought I saw a smile crease his lips at that statement.

"What was going through your mind at this point Devin?"

"Just how they had taken over already. How much time we spend on them, how many private issues we trust them with and how they are *always* around. My cell phone alone is my alarm, email, personal computer, camera, books reader, flashlight, encyclopedia, dictionary, and game system."

"Did you think about just getting rid of your phone?"

"Well I was about to smash the phone when it rang. Like that was a coincidence."

"Who was on the phone?"

"My wife, but I didn't answer it. I know it was a trick, those damn I-Phones are smart, but not smart enough. No pun intended doc. When I didn't answer she text and asked how I felt, but I ignored that too. I knew it was a trap."

"So what happened next?"

"She came just after I finished getting rid of my phone. She said she *was worried*. I knew right then that they had gotten to her, that heartless bitch didn't worry about anyone."

"I'm sure she was Devin, you didn't answer her call or texts. You had been up all night. She clearly cares about you."

"I told you it wasn't her!"

"I'm sorry, go on."

"She came in and asked how I was, I played along ya know, said I was fine. Then she walked into the other room and saw the computer pieces on the floor and the wires torn from the walls."

"What did she say?" The shrink asked, looking up now and staring through the wire rimmed glasses on his nose.

"Well she was about to start yelling, I could tell, she always gets this real constipated look on her face when she's mad but her phone rang. She said it was work and walked into the den. She was talking on the phone when it hit me....they had gotten to her too. It wasn't work at all. It was so obvious you might have even caught it doc." I laughed at the back-handed comment.

"Mr. Stephenson, I don't like where this is going."

"Shut up old man and let me finish! It was them not me! They had taken control of her!" I heard my voice rising in pitch, almost squeaking as I continued. "She had a phone to her ear, the blue tooth from when she was in the car, the tablet she carried everywhere, hell the keys to her car had an electric fob!"

"What did you do Mr. Stephenson?" The shrink said, staring strangely at me as he slowly rose to his feet. He didn't take his eyes from me but slowly moved towards the desk, feeling for furniture with his loose hand.

"It looks like you already know doc. I had to save her, they had taken control of her."

III

Dr. Harding walked back into his office and sat in the leather chair behind his desk. He still had an eerie feeling from the Stephenson patient's story. A murder, and simply because a man had undiagnosed schizophrenia, or maybe homophobia. Regardless of the diagnosis, it was a shame. A young woman had needlessly been murdered.

"Dr. Harding, Dade County P.D., line two," his secretary's voice screeched through the intercom on his desk.

"I'll take it Kay, thanks." He heard a click on the other end of the phone as she transferred the call.

"Dr. Harding, this is Officer Brown, I wanted to call and thank you for the tip on Devin Stephenson. The wife's body has been recovered and we have alerted the district attorney."

"Okay, I have him placed him under watch in our wards. He is sitting in a white room yelling about the electric lights and laughing hysterically. It's a sad case officer."

"Yeah it's horrible what people are capable of. But thanks again for the tip, and the cruiser we sent to get Mr. Stephenson should be there anytime now."

"I'm glad to hear it officer, and thanks for the call." He hung up glad the nightmare was over. Time to move past this horrible day. He doubted it would leave his mind that easy, but he needed to try.

He leaned over the desk and turned on the Bose sound system. The right classical music was soothing in these moments.

He turned on his computer and pulled up his email account. Scanning through his vision settled on a strange message. It was probably junk but the subject line intrigued him:

From: ELM-2762

Subject: What you requested

He didn't remember requesting anything and what type of address was ELM-2762? He decided he couldn't just erase it but when he opened it his heart sank.

The first line gave instructions for making bombs out of fertilizer. The second line was a link to some kind of illegal porn.

"What the fuck!" He yelled before slamming the laptop shut. He would have to call tech and let them know about this before there could be a misunderstanding. His job would be in jeopardy if it was taken wrong.

"I could go to prison, or have the Department of Homeland Security here!" He got up, almost knocking the chair over before realizing how flustered he had become.

"Calm down, you haven't done anything. Just get your stuff and go home." He said to himself,

breathing deep. "Listen to the music, breath through your diaphragm and relax."

He opened the middle drawer and pulled his phone out, and put on his coat. Glancing at his phone he noticed he had received a couple of text messages. He opened them and the first was a warning that his bank account was overdrawn. The automated system sent out warnings when your account was in the red, but he had never received one before. He prided himself on being frugal and would never let his account drop that low.

"This is some sort of mistake, I have over two thousand in that account," he whispered to himself. "I'll call first thing in the morning and straightened it out."

Then he opened the second one, it was from his wife.

From: Linda

I just got your text you asshole! How could u? Ur throwin away 12 years of marriage for this?

4:47P.M.

"What the hell does that mean?" He said, staring at the phone. He hadn't text her all day, and had no idea what she was talking about. "Everything seemed fine when I left this morning. I'll call her from the car, another misunderstanding, not a big deal." The words were meant to be comforting, but the cracking voice gave away his frustration.

"Kay, I'm going home," he said hitting the intercom button. He waited for her response, but it wasn't Mary that answered.

"Okay Dr. Harding. Don't forget your phone, you may want to text your wife on your drive home," came the response. The voice was computer generated.





In Sickness, and in Health

By Sean M. Thompson

He didn't expect her to come back. After how he'd left things, he thought for sure she'd never step foot in the house again. Catherine was always full of surprises.

"Jared," Catherine said.

"Didn't expect you to come back," he said.

"You and me both," she said.

He took a deep breath, and got a good look at her. Still as beautiful as the day he'd married her. Those full lips, which accompanied the rest of her pale, eastern European body. From the Czech Republic, specifically. She was a match for him intellectually. Quite the catch. Things just didn't work out. He'd had pressing business matters that'd torn their marriage apart.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked her.

"Of course, a little bit, but I'm nothing if not forgiving."

This was true. Catherine had discovered his affair with that tramp ten years younger than her. Sure, there was quite the fight. A solid months worth of fighting. In the end, she'd agreed to stay with him, as long as Jared promised to never fuck around on her again. He hadn't. Even after she'd left, he'd remained faithful. Mainly, due to his overwhelming guilt.

"You know, I haven't been with another women since you left," he said.

"I know," she said.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I have my sources," she said.

Jared wondered how long she'd been watching him.

"Did you really think it would work?" she asked him.

He was wondering when this part was going to come up. Lord knows he deserved it.

"It did work, you know, I just never figured you would come back."

"You know what I want more than anything?" she asked him.

"What's that, my love?" Jared asked.

"For you to fuck me upstairs. With the moon light shining in the background, and the view of the woods behind the house. I want you to ravage me while the night acts a voyeur, exploring every inch of my sweating, naked body."

He was taken aback.

"Will it even, I mean, can you even..."

"Yes, I can. It'll just be a little different than you're used to."

"I can handle different," Jared said.

She let her skirt fall to the carpet. It was the skirt she'd worn, the last time he'd seen her.

They made their way upstairs to the bedroom, hand in hand. Her hand was cold. She'd always had circulation problems.

Catherine took off her blouse, and unhooked her bra. Her bare skin glowed in the darkness. An ethereal wonder to behold. She should never have returned, and yet here she was.

"I've missed you so much. I'm so sorry," he said.

She put a finger up to his lips, and whispered into his ear.

"Shhhhh, no more words."

They made their way by the big window, which overlooked the backyard. She unbuckled his belt, and lowered his pants and boxers. She started to rub his cock. She went down on her knees, and took him in her mouth. It was a strange sensation, not quite what he expected. An electric tingle almost.

He touched her bare breasts in the light of the moon, and kissed her neck. He touched her, between her legs, and it was odd. He never assumed he'd ever get this chance again. He didn't deserve it.

He pulled her tight to him, and inserted himself. He started to thrust; gently at first, but with increasing ferocity as the minutes went by.

"Men... you are so predictable," Catherine whispered into his ear.

"You might... have a point... at that," he said, between heavy breaths.

"Open the window darling, I want to feel the breeze on my bare skin."

Jared pulled himself out of her, and used the hand crank to open the window. It was cold. February in Connecticut usually was.

"Darling, do you know why I came back?" she asked him.

"For this," he said.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, and turned her around, so she was facing away from him.

She flipped right back around.

"No, I want to look you in the eyes while I fuck you," she said.

"Fair enough," he said.

"Go by the window," she said.

"It's cold," he said.

"Do you want to fuck me or not?" she asked him.

Jared sat his naked ass on the three-inch stool underneath the open window, facing the bedroom. There was a screen, but it didn't offer much protection from the wind.

She grabbed his erection, and maneuvered the head of it over her clit. She moaned, then took him inside her.

"I can't help it, I'm going to cum soon," he blurted out.

"No, you're going to leave soon," she said.

"What...are...you...talking?"

She pushed him through the screen. It was flimsy, and ripped. It scraped into the flesh of Jared's back. Catherine grabbed his hands.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he shouted.

"I said I wanted to look in your eyes while I fucked you," she said.

His eyes went wide. He could feel blood trickling out of the cuts in his back. The ripped screen dug into his ribs on either side.

"I'd say you're pretty fucked," she said.

"I can explain," he stammered.

"I know why you did it. I had a hefty insurance policy. But hiring an assassin? The Irish mob? Really, Jared, I would have thought you'd have the balls to just do it yourself."

She let go of his left hand, and squeezed his balls, hard. Jared moaned in pain. She began to twist her hand. His legs kicked spasmodically, and he was not even aware of it.

"Please...stop," he said, through gritted teeth.

"Stop what? Oh, squeezing your balls? Yeah, no."

She jerked the hand holding him below towards her, and hard. Only holding him with one hand, most of the weight of his body, and gravity, made it so he was effectively kept from falling by his scrotum and testicles. If he lived through this, he'd have to go see a specialist. Something was ripped, and permanently damaged. And still the pain ached on.

"You got Jimmy Snaggletooth to off me in a fucking parking garage! And you have the nerve to tell me to stop."

"I had...debts..."

"Oh, yes, the gambling debts. Weren't those charming. Well, I hope it was worth it."

She yanked at him again. He threw up his dinner onto his bare chest.

"Honestly, how did you think this would play out? I'm fucking dead! You had me killed! I am a fucking ghost! Because of you! Because you had gambling debts!"

"I'm sorrrheeheeheeeeyyyy...." He said, through sobs of pain and grief.

"I know you are," she said.

She opened her hands.

She heard his scream, as he fell. She waited until she heard the impact of his body on the concrete patio. When she heard the satisfying crunch of his spine, and neck, she smiled.

Then, she left.



The Boy Brigade

By Chris Daruns

Jak watched the town burn. It was evening and he sat with his back against the hillside, smoking, with his rifle across his lap.

It was beautiful, he thought. The smoke and fire so big that it was hard to imagine it getting any bigger. Flames licked the side of corrugate tin roofs of the larger buildings and swallowed the small thatched huts whole. He licked his lips and tasted ash. Fire can always get bigger.

As he smoked, Jak thought that the fire was like him. A proper destroyer. He thought that he could be like the smoke and suffocate his enemies. That he could be the heat that burns skin. Good thoughts.

Good day.

The other soldiers sat around, some watching the village burn, others taking their candy time. Some of the older soldiers passed out pills and powder to the younger recruits. The babies. Others were guarding the prisoners; scared women and children.

Rocket sat next to him, cigarette dangling from his lips. His new hat, looted off a corpse today, sat too large on his smooth head. It was camo and speckled with drying blood. The green tube of his rocket launcher, his namesake, hung off his shoulder like a woman's purse. He carried it everywhere even though there hadn't been ammo for in a long time.

"How many dogs you kill?" Rocket asked him.

Jak didn't answer, he dragged on his cigarette again, keeping his eyes on one of the burning houses as its roof collapsed.

"I killed a lot, I think," Rocket continued. "I threw a bomb into that hut, over there. There must have four or five coward dogs inside."

“You probably only killed women and babies,” Jak said.

“What’s the difference? They’re all government dogs.”

Rocket had a point, a dog was a dog was a dog.

“You have blood on your bayonet,” Rocket offered, pointing to the matte black knife in Jak’s hand. “You must have killed a dog. At least one.”

“Just some coward,” Jak said, not adding that he used it to slit the throat of some wounded man. Not important, just some gut-shot coward.

Their commander, colonel Isaiah, walked amongst the troops, giving words of encouragement and praise. He was happy, white teeth shining as he slapped the younger boys on the back. He was the oldest of them, Jak didn’t know how old but he seemed ancient. Been fighting a long time. Finally, the colonel gathered the soldiers around him. Jak and Rocket stood to hear him speak.

“It is very good, what you have done today. I feel like a proud papa to all of you. With this victory, the government traitors will know what fear is. We’re going to return to our camp and let the government dogs try to find us. But I don’t think they can. This is our territory now. Ten minutes, then we move out. Dismissed.”

Jak turned his attention back to the burning town. Bodies had been left where they’d fallen, no point in burying the enemy. Tomorrow there would be other enemies, too many, you couldn’t bury them all.

Most of the buildings had collapsed by now, caving in on themselves and turning into funeral pyres for the corpses inside.

The prisoners wailed at first, screaming for the loss of family members, cowardly government traitors all of them. They wailed and screamed until corporal Lam beat one of the women with his rifle stock.

Jak watched, indifferent as Lam hit the woman on the head and back, yelling at her to shut up.

The prisoners were silent after that.

Soon they were marching again, back to their

camp.

Jak walked in the middle, near the train of prisoners. He knew some would become workers for the resistance, others would become bush wives of the older soldiers. The children, if they proved strong enough, would become new fighters. This was how things were.

The woman Lam beat couldn’t walk after the first mile. One of the older soldiers, Sony, pulled the tiresome bitch out of line and made her kneel before him. He undid his pants and shoved his thing in her face, making her put it in her mouth. The other soldiers cheered him on, taking opportunity of the impromptu break to smoke a cigarette or have more candy. The other prisoners tried not to watch.

Soon Sony was rutting against her face, howling at the tree tops. He came compulsively, quickly. She coughed and choked, spitting out his seed on the dead jungle leaves. She didn’t see Sony pull his bayonet from his belt.

Sony put the zigzag part of the blade to her throat and jerked it back and forth, sawing her neck. She spasmed a little bit, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Drowning.

Sony laughed and zipped up his pants.

They left her there.

Another few miles and they were at camp. It had been a long day and Jak was tired. He lined up with the others for a bowl of rice porridge.

He ate and did candy with other boys. It wasn’t time to sleep yet.

Colonel Isaiah appeared from his tent, dressed in fresh fatigues, his pistol shiny on his hip.

“Time to choose the new recruits!” he roared.

The boys all cheered, Jak’s voice drowned out in the chorus.

The prisoners were lined up. Some of the officers, older boys like Lam and Sony, took several of the women and disappeared with them in their tents. Then just the crones and children were left.

Jak was very excited. Recruiting time was

always exciting.

The colonel called Rocket first. Rocket stood and walked up to a boy clinging to his mother. He yanked the boy away by his arm, dragging the child into the rough circle the others had formed. The child was six or seven, wailing for his family. Rocket smiled at the boy, then began to soothe him with kind words.

“You’re safe, baby brother,” he said, hugging the boy. “We’re going to be your new family now. I am your new brother. I am going to protect you.”

The boy calmed a little bit and Rocket led him away.

Jak’s turn was next.

Unlike Rocket, Jak didn’t want to waste time. That boy was Rocket’s first, so it was expected that he’d take his time to recruit him. To break him down before what needed to be done. One day, two, it didn’t matter. Jak wasn’t going to wait.

He walked up and grabbed another boy from his mother’s grasp. She cried out, trying to suppress it but wailing none the less.

Jak’s boy was a smite older, eight maybe. He was chubby-faced with large eyes.

Jak pulled the boy into the loose circle. The boy protested, he even had the audacity to try and pull away.

He turned the boy to face him.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

The boy, in tears, lifted his head.

“What is your name?” Jak asked.

“Kanzi,” he replied.

“That’s a slave name. You are better than that name. Stronger.”

The boy looked at him, puzzled.

“I am your brother.” Jak continued.
“Everywhere I go I strike fear into the hearts of traitor dogs. You will be that way too. You’re not a dog, are you?”

Jak looked into this boy’s eyes and the rest of the world fell away. The boy shook his head.

“Good. You will be my brother,” Jak motioned to the rest of the boy brigade, “They are your family. You don’t have anyone but us and we have no one but you.”

Jak pulled his bayonet from his belt. He placed it in the boy’s hand.

“You take this and you stick it into her belly. You do it and become our family.”

The boy scrunched his face in confusion, staring at the bayonet in his hand. It slowly dawned on him what he was being asked to do.

“That’s my mama,” he whined.

“No, she is the enemy.”

“I don’t want to hurt her.”

“That’s what traitor dogs say. You said you’re not a dog, right?”

The boy shook his head slowly, tears flowing freely now. Jak turned him toward his mother.

He whispered in the boy’s ear, “You put the blade in her and you are my brother. You refuse and I put the blade in you, because you refuse to be my brother.”

The woman’s expression was blank. It was as if she wasn’t there anymore. She’d stopped crying, stopped wailing. She didn’t move when her son approached her. Didn’t blink. She stared at the ground, kneeling, hands limp at her side.

The voices of the others grew louder. They began cheering as he came closer, bayonet outstretched, arm tense.

Jak remembered when it had been him. When it had been Lam who towered over him and put the knife in his hand. Lam said the similar things. Jak had been born that day like a spark birthing a macabre flame.

The boy hesitated when he got within arm’s reach. His mother looked at him then. She leaned forward and whispered to him. Jak didn’t have to hear

her to know what she said.

The boy nodded and pulled back his arm.

He stabbed her in the belly and everyone cheered.

They called him a hero. They laughed and slapped him on the back. The boy was pulled away, crying, blood covering his hand. His mother, knife still in her, slumped over to bleed out in the dead leaves. She did not scream, nor did she moan. She just slumped over and was still.

Jak walked over to her as the boy was pulled away by the others, no doubt to be fed candy and rum and given his first cigarette. Jak could feel the proud eyes of the colonel on his back. She was still alive, bayonet sticking out from her stomach like a monument.

Jak knelt next to her and pulled the blade out. He thought about his own mother's words when he drove it back in. Again and again.

You're a good boy.

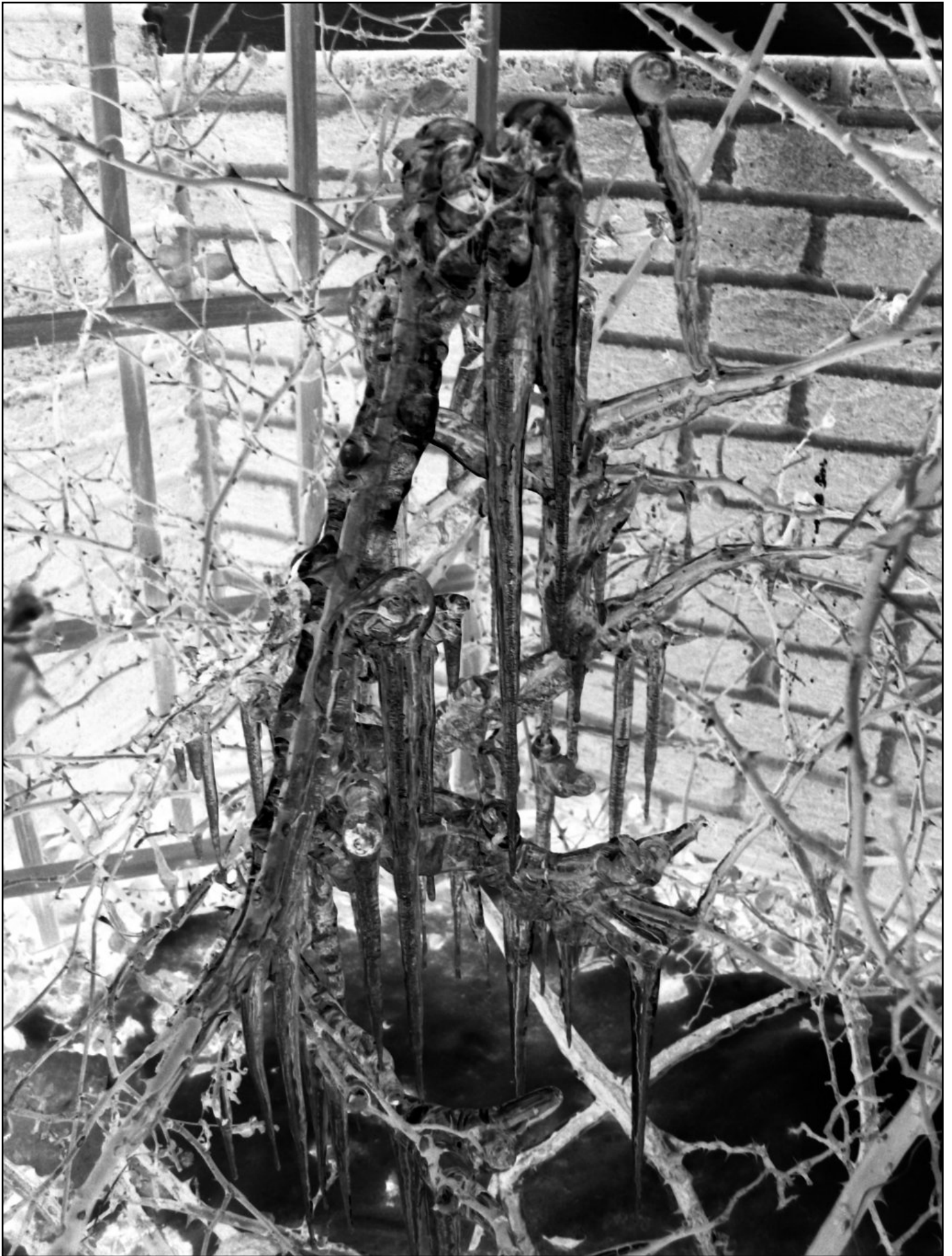
He looked up to see colonel Isaiah.

"I said, 'you're a good boy'." He stoked Jax's head with fatherly affection, "You did a good job today. You're a good soldier."

Jak cleaned the bayonet and resheathed it in his belt.

And went to join the celebration.





THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

Part 8

“The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones”. Act 3, Scene II – *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare

Warning: This story contains graphic adult situations, including bondage, vulgarity, nudity, sexual content, and torture. Discretion is advised.

Karen was hanging naked upside down from the spreader bar, gently swaying back and forth with her head inches from the floor. Her ankles were achingly tied as far apart as they could go on the bar, with her tied wrists attached by a length of rope to the bar as well. A cinder block was anchoring her neck with rope that gave her only a foot or so of slack from the stone floor. She heard the shrill sound of the bullwhip wielded by Renee cutting through the air, but in total darkness thanks to the blindfold covering her eyes. It increased her terror not being able to see it coming, causing her to pull and tug uselessly at the ropes binding her wrists to a spreader bar. But she could feel it when it struck near her crotch, a painful explosion of air that caused her to flinch in shock. And with every crack of the whip another shriek erupted from Karen. It seemed to her as if her flesh was being stripped from her vagina a piece at a time, and Kent couldn't watch anymore without responding.

“Renee, Stop! For God's sake stop! You're going to...” Cyndi Beth clapped her hand over Kent's mouth and cut his cries for mercy short. But Kent was able to find an opening and bit down hard on her hand. Screaming, she responded by yanking cruelly on the rope tied tightly around his genitalia, causing him to shout aloud in pain. Then she grabbed Kent by his hair and unleashed several blows to his face. “That's just for starters,” she growled. “When Renee turns her attention back to you, remember what you'll get,” she said, pointing up at the enema bag above him and the tube leading from it to the dildo rammed in his anus.

Crack! Renee continued to deftly zero in on Karen's unshaved sex. She couldn't tell if her pubic hair was being slowly ripped from her skin with each blow or not. All she knew was she couldn't help but continue to howl every time the whip cracked between her legs and licked near her pussy. Once in a while the whip would actually make contact with her tender skin, and the pain was incredible, a searing sting like a burning brand pressed against her tender flesh. Her mind and body was wracked with suffering and her weeping was inconsolable.

Renee delighted in Karen's fright. She had no intention of trying to strip the pubic hairs from her pussy, but such a gullible young fool as she wouldn't know that. The only time she hit Karen was when she accidentally missed. Crack! Another strike, another burning ache near her sex. Crack! More increasingly panicked cries of wretchedness and sobs of misery. Crack! Another hit near her flesh, which made her jump and shriek. Crack! Crack! Crack! To Karen, it seemed as though this was a nightmare from which she couldn't awake. To Renee, still clothed in her revealing corset, full-length gloves reaching to her elbows, red velvet mask, and thigh-high stiletto-heel boots, it was a delicious dream of which she couldn't get enough. Her G-string complete with an attached devil tail trailing behind and a full-length cape still lay on the floor where she had stripped them off.

“Renee, p-please, no more!” Karen yelled and pleaded. “No more! Please have mercy; I'll do whatever you want! Just, p-please, no... no m-ore-ore-ore,” she sobbed. Renee paused in mid strike, and held her

bullwhip aloft for several seconds, deciding what she would do. Then she slowly coiled the whip and walked over to Karen and regarded her as if she were a succulent dish waiting for her to devour.

She continued to howl uncontrollably, so Renee looked down at Karen's pussy to observe her work. There were three places where the lash met her flesh near her sex. Each oozed blood and was a swollen reddish-purple color, but nothing Renee would deem serious. Then she kneeled down next to her and keenly observed her misery with twisted pleasure. Placing her whip on the floor, she got on her knees with Karen's head between her thighs.

Suddenly she seized Karen's head and slammed her mouth to her pussy. Karen felt her lips come in contact with Renee's shaved vagina and immediately, almost desperately began to perform on her cunt, despite never having done so before. Renee, surprised by Karen's eagerness, keenly observed her slave's actions. Karen was clumsy at first, and Renee had to guide her head for her tongue to find the right spot. But eventually she closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and bit her bottom lip in pleasure. She was ecstatic, not only for being eaten out, but also for another level of resistance she had smashed and ripped away from Karen. It wouldn't be long before she was broken to her will completely.

Renee ground Karen's head harder into her sex, burying her mouth there. She rotated her head in rhythm to the movement of her thighs, to get the best satisfaction she could from Karen's predicament.

"Oh, oh yes, you're learning well, my little whore. Stick that... oohhhh... that tongue up inside me, my slut, further... further... further... almost there..." Karen obliged, her jaw completely covering Renee's vagina and her tongue finding and whipping around her clitoris, faster and faster in time to the movement of Renee's legs. She held Karen's head as hard as she could against her, until finally she became still, arching her head back with mouth agape. Then she climaxed with a joyous shout.

"AAAAOOOoohhhhhh! Oh, my sweet little bitch, welcome to the wonderful world of cunnilingus, my dear whore! That was a sweet, sweet orgasm! Not bad for a beginner! That is, if you really are a beginner." Renee looked down at Karen, who was breathing hard and blushing furiously. She looked up at Karen's pussy and saw evidence of her arousal as well.

"Why you lying little tramp! You HAVE done this before! Ha ha ha ha ha! I'm going to have to add that to your long list of offenses to your soon-to-be Mistress! And you already know what your punishment will be, so keep that tongue supple!" Renee gave a sly look over to Kent, who had watched the entire affair from his place stretched upside-down on a St. Andrews Cross. His eyes were wide with shock.

"Well, hubby, what do you think of your virginal, squeaky clean wifey now, hmmm? Y'know Kent, I think she actually outperformed you!" she sneered. "Instead of selling her off, I might actually keep her, locking her in her own little cage until I need a good licking again. How's that sound?" She released Karen's head to hang inverted, swaying gently with her body from the bar.

"Well, now, my devils, I think my new whore needs a breath of fresh air about now, don't you?" Carl and Archie laughed and walked over, the two taking the ropes Karen was suspended from and both began to pull her upwards slowly. Soon all the slack was taken out of the rope from her neck to the cinder block. But still the two hauled her up, lifting the cinder block and turning Karen's face crimson with the tightness of the rope.

"Please!" was all Karen could barely say hoarsely, but it made Renee hold up a hand and stop Carl and Archie. She looked down at Karen, whose face was now turning reddish-purple. Renee, eyes shining coldly, reached down, removed her blindfold, and seized her by her hair, roughly yanking it upward so that she could see her face.

“Please what?” Renee inquired.

Karen’s tortured eyes flowed with tears, and her rasping voice caught in her throat. Renee slapped her savagely across the face several times, jerking her head back even further till Karen’s eyes and mouth were gaping wide open. “PLEASE WHAT?” Renee demanded.

Finally Karen’s words, halting, fearful, and etched with suffering came forth. Her eyes turned one way and then the other, as if searching visually for what to say. She finally looked into Renee’s eyes with bewilderment. Her voice could barely speak and her face began to turn blue due to the lack of oxygen. Rick and the other crewmembers exchanged worried looks at Renee.

“P-please... please... let... me... breathe... M-m-mis... Mis...” Karen gasped. Her eyes began to lose focus, and her chest gasped for air. Renee, grinning like a demon, gave the order for Carl and Archie to lower her so that the cinder block once again rested on the floor and she could gain a few precious breaths of air.

Rick’s headset crackled with Keith the soundman’s voice. “What is it, Keith?” he whispered. “We’re live. Can’t this wait?”

“I don’t know,” Keith replied. “Remember those weird voices we heard earlier?”

“Yeah, what about ‘em?”

“They’re back.”

Rick looked over uncomprehendingly to where Keith sat at his station. He motioned for Rick to come over. Checking his camera, Rick padded silently over to him. Keith held out his headphones, and Rick held one earpiece to an ear.

“Son of a... what the fuck is that?”

“I don’t know,” Keith replied, “but it’s not our doing. It sounds like a bunch of people having a conversation but I can’t tell what they’re saying.”

Rick gave Keith his headphones back. He was silent for a while. Then he looked at Keith.

“We’ll wait till this shoot is over and then we’ll sort it out.” He moved back over to his camera.

Keith put his headphones back on. “That would be nice,” he mumbled to himself. “This place is seriously creeping me out.”

Then once more Renee gave the order to lift Karen upwards until the block lifted slightly, cutting off her air. She squirmed and stretched her head downward in a futile attempt to breathe. Again her red face began to turn blue. But this time Renee let her breathlessness last a little longer than the last time before telling Carl and Archie to lower her. Karen coughed continuously, hoarsely wheezing for breath.

It was then that Carl shivered, as if feeling a cold draft despite his outfit and exertions. He was about to mention this to Archie when he got a good look at Renee. She was now squatting on all fours near Karen’s head, almost face to face. The look on her face was maniacal, eyes wide with a crazed desire, mouth open slightly, wearing a smile only a devil could form. She was drinking in Karen’s suffering just as assuredly as a vampire satiates itself on blood.

Karen’s face had turned blue again, but this time Renee gave no order to lower her. Carl looked closer and saw something else in Renee’s face. She didn’t want to see Karen suffer. She wanted to see Karen die. And if something weren’t done she would surely do so. Already Karen was beginning to tremble, choking for

precious air that wasn't coming. On his own initiative he began to lower Karen to the floor so she could breathe. Archie, observing Carl, followed suit as well. Rick and the others manning their equipment were stunned by Renee's behavior. Renee whipped her head around to Carl, her face a mask of fury. "What the fuck are you doing? Did I give you permission to do that? Lift that bitch up again and don't lower her till I tell you to!"

"She was going to die!" Carl shouted back. "That's not part of this session! What's wrong with you, Renee?"

Renee leaped to her feet and ran over to where Carl held the rope. "Give me that rope, you son of a bitch!" She jumped into the air to grab the section of rope above Carl's hands and then dropped down with it, yanking Karen back into the air to gag once again.

"STOP HER!" Kent yelled, and this time no one tried to silence him. Carl began to wrestle with Renee for the rope. This time Karen just hung limply in the air, the cinder block holding her head at an odd angle.

"Let go of me, you bastard! I give the orders around here!" Renee screamed. Soon Carl was joined by Rick and Cyndi Beth struggling with Renee for the rope. She was fighting and cursing like a madwoman. Then a clunk was heard. All eyes looked to Karen, where Archie was standing next to her with a knife, having cut the rope to the block. Cyndi Beth joined him to untie the rope around her neck and make sure she was breathing. Rick grabbed Renee and shook her for several seconds.

"Renee, you crazy bitch, what's gotten into you?" he yelled. She stood in Rick's grasp, her visage one of menace and hate. Then her derangement slowly dissipated. She looked up at Rick as if seeing him for the first time.

"Rick... I... I'm sorry... something just... just..." She lowered her head on Rick's chest and he hugged her tightly. She took several deep breaths and stood there next to Rick, her arms drawn up to her chest.

Rick looked around at the others, just as stunned as he was. "That does it, boss. It's time you got some sleep, time we all got some sleep." Rick replied. Renee shook her head. "No it's all right. Let's finish this shoot, and then we can sleep, Rick. Then we can sleep, ok?" Renee placed a hand on his cheek and looked deeply into Rick's eyes, the meaning clear to both of them. Rick slowly nodded and reluctantly let her go.

Taking a deep breath, Renee stepped back over to where Karen was still hanging from the bar. She told Carl and Archie to lower her to the floor and free her from the bar. Then she instructed them to tie her back onto the bar in a tight hogtie, hanging painfully with her wrists and feet overlapping the top of the bar and ropes wrapping around her waist tied upwards to the middle of the bar to support her. Finally a rope was looped around her hair and pulled back tight to her ankles, forcing her face to look forward. The ends of the bar were adjusted so that each end was a foot short of her torso, leaving her head and buttocks free of obstruction. Then she was hauled up again and secured to swing in misery in the air about two and a half feet from the floor.

Looking around to make sure everyone was at his or her places, she gave a wan smile. Pacing back and forth for several minutes, Rick and the others kept a keen eye on her. Soon she was walking with her head high, shoulders back, with devilish gleam in her eyes and evil smirk on her lips. Rick took a deep breath and slowly released it, looking at the rest of the crew and nodding with a smile. The old Renee was back. She took a position next to Karen. Then Renee looked at her crew, gave a wink and then yelled, "Action!"

"My devils!" Renee called out loud. "I'm so sorry to have neglected your needs! You have performed so well for me this evening I think it's time for a little amusement for you, don't you think?" Renee moved over to where Karen hung from the bar. She placed her hand under Karen's chin. "Is there anything you can think of

that might suit your needs?” Carl and Archie exchanged lascivious looks at each other, leaned their pitchforks on the St. Andrews Cross, and began to walk towards Karen.

Kent was the first to respond. “Oh, my God, no Renee! Don’t let them do this! I’ll do anything you want! Just don’t let them do this!”

Renee looked back at Kent and laughed cruelly. “Oh, you’ll do anything I want? Why, thank you! As if I needed your permission. You don’t mind being sloppy seconds, do you?” She nodded to Cyndi Beth, who slid her pants outfit down enough for Kent to service her. Then she grabbed the back of his head and began to rub his mouth up and down her pussy.

“Well, looks like your hubby is having some fun, dearest, so I think you should have some as well, right boys?” she said to Carl and Archie. They both nodded, laughing, with one taking the front of Karen and the other moving behind her. Taking out their erections through a hole in their costumes, they teased Karen at first, rubbing them against her face and buttocks. Then, as Karen watched in horror, Carl slowly moved his fully erect penis towards her mouth.

“NO! Don’t! Donnmmppphhh!” she managed to garble as Carl thrust his engorged member fully into her mouth, causing her to choke. She then screamed from her throat as Archie joined in, pushing his huge cock into her vagina from behind. The two of them, very adept at this sort of thing under Renee’s tutelage, began a long, slow, ravaging of Karen’s body.

After about ten minutes of raping Karen from both ends, the two devils switched places. “Oh, no! Please, no morppphhh!” Karen protested helplessly as the two continued their outrage of her helpless, bound form. Another ten to fifteen minutes passed, with Karen forced to service both Carl and Archie simultaneously.

“Hey now, you horny devils, don’t you think you should give me and Cyndi Beth a go at our little housewife? I’m sure you can find something to do with our hubby over there.” Archie pulled his erection from Karen’s mouth reluctantly, allowing his cum mingled with Karen’s spittle to drip to the floor.

“Ah, ah, ah! Waste not, want not, my dear housewife!” Renee stooped down and wiped up the mixture from Karen’s mouth and put her gloved fingers in her mouth, forcing her to swallow it. “There now, that’s a good girl!” Renee said. “Don’t you ever spit anything out again, understand, whore?” she said with a cold edge on her voice, punctuating her remark with a stinging slap across the face.

In the meantime Carl and Archie had reached Kent, and were struggling to put something on him. Then they stood back, revealing a harness they had strapped onto Kent’s head, which featured an open mouth gag, forcing his mouth to remain open and waiting for the two of them. They wasted no time in taking advantage of it.

“Nuuhhh! Nuuu-ggghhh...” Kent protested as Carl inserted his cock into his mouth and began to thrust forcefully, holding him by the back of his head and pulling it to him in rhythm with his own thighs. Archie laughed, awaiting his turn. “Now we’ll see how you like the taste of a man, we will!”

Cyndi Beth was approaching Renee, who had just finished wiping off her fingers in Karen’s mouth. “Why look what Cyndi Beth’s brought you, dear! I’ll bet you never saw the like of these before!” And Karen never had, to be sure. Cyndi Beth had a strap-on harness in each hand, both fitted with a huge dildo, one colored red and the other black. Cyndi Beth reached Renee and she chose the one she wanted, the two of them strapping them on in front of Karen’s face.

“No, no, please don’t! Those are too big! You’ll hurt me with them! Please, Renee, please don’t!” Karen whimpered.

“Well, dear, I might have been moved by your plea, but you see, you keep forgetting to address me as ‘Mistress’, and this is something we still need to work on, I guess.” Renee leaned down and took Karen’s sobbing face by her chin. “Don’t worry darling. I hear it only hurts the first time.” Renee laughed wickedly, and then held out her hand to Cyndi Beth, who passed a coin to her.

“Call it, girl,” she said as she flipped the coin in the air. Cyndi Beth called heads, and Renee held the coin out to her. “Heads, damn. Ok, girl, there’s her head for you, I guess I’ll take her tail,” she said snickering as she walked around to the back of Karen.

“Oh please don’t Mistress! Mistress Renee, please don’t, Mistress!” Karen begged piteously. “Sorry, wifey, but that’s a little too late. Perhaps this will remind you in the future to address me properly.”

“Oh, no! Please don’t, please, please don’t! Please...AAAOOOWWWW!” Karen screamed as Renee thrust the huge dildo into her anus. “Stop! Please stop! You’re killing me! You’ll tear me apart! Please mmmppphhhnnn!” Karen was silenced as Cyndi Beth filled her mouth with the huge dildo that made her jaws ache. The two women continued their strapped-on assault of Karen with gusto, laughing when they caught each other’s eye. Renee added a stinging slap to Karen’s tender and scarred ass from time to time for good measure.

Suddenly Kent could be heard coughing and gagging, along with a sigh of ecstasy from Carl. “Damn, boy, you suck cock like you’ve done it all your life!” he laughed. “Hey Archie, your turn, and don’t forget to ram your Johnson all the way down his throat when you shoot at his tonsils, y’hear? Gotta make sure this homo gets every last drop, know what I mean?” Carl withdrew his limp dick and stood back for Archie to step in. “Don’t you worry, mate. When I cum I’ll blow his eyeballs out from behind, I will!” The two roared with mirth at each other.

When Renee and Cyndi Beth felt they had enough pounding away at Karen, they switched sides. Only this time Renee screwed a new dildo into her strap-on, one that had a bulb-pump attached to it. Karen’s eyes grew wide with fright at seeing this. “Oh my God! What is this you’ve got now, Renee?” she inquired, her voice trembling with fear.

“God-damn, Karen! Are you ever going to remember my title? It’s Mistress Renee, MISTRESS Renee, got that?” she spit out at Karen, this time balling up her fist and punching her in the face and bloodying her nose. “What is it going to take to get you to remember that? I guess maybe this little do-hickey might do the trick,” she glowered. “I’m sorry, Re-... MISTRESS Renee!” Karen whimpered. Rolling her eyes, Renee pushed her hips forward and showed the menacing looking device in front of Karen’s face.

“As you can see, there is a pump attached to this monster. Now, what do you think is in the pump, hmmm?” she said, eyes mockingly bright and opened wide, looking across at Cyndi Beth, who was lining up for her penetration of Karen from behind. Karen, still crying from the punch in the face, simply shook her head.

“Well, you never know when you might need it, so from time to time I ask the boys to contribute to the bank.” When Karen gave her a puzzled look, Renee repeated, “The bank, sweetie, the bank... the... bank...” Renee kept repeating, without success. She looked up at Cyndi Beth, who was doubled over laughing. “Fuck! She really is a dumb-ass, isn’t she?” she screamed out loud, grinning. Finally as a last resort, she pointed the dildo at her, a bare few inches from her face.

“Watch the birdy!” Renee said with glee, and gave the bulb a slight squeeze.

Karen, who was furrowing her brow and staring intently at the head of the dildo, was caught off guard as a small spurt of sperm shot from the hole and splattered into her face.

“Oh my God!” she shouted aloud. “You mean that all the men here jerked off into that... that thing?” Karen was aghast.

“No, dear, all the men jerked off into a container that I kept in a refrigerator until it was needed, like, ohhh, now!” Renee’s left hand shot forth and seized Karen’s clenched jaw, trying to force it painfully open. “Open wide, dear, here comes the choo-choo train!” Suddenly Cyndi Beth drove her monstrous strap-on dick into her ass, forcing her to scream aloud. With that, Renee thrust her waist forward and rammed the huge, black dildo into Karen’s mouth and nearly drove it down her throat. Karen’s eyes were bulging wide, and pleading with Renee. She mewled wretchedly around the dildo.

“What’s the matter dear? Don’t you know semen is nutritious? Tastes good, too! Oh, you already found that out, didn’t you? Well, always room for a second helping!” Renee sneered wickedly. Karen shook her head in vain, as Renee slowly raised the pump-bulb in front of her face and slowly began to slowly squeeze the contents of the bulb into her mouth and down her throat. She immediately began to gag on the sticky fluid.

“Don’t you cough any of that out! The boys went to a lot of trouble to serve it up to you, and I’ll not let you waste a single drop!” Renee snarled. But despite her dire warning, Karen continued to choke, unable to get any breath, and started to turn red in the face. Soon white fluid began to drip from her nostrils, and she continued to beg with her eyes, shut almost closed, to be released from her torture.

But Renee was unrelenting. She reached over and pinched Karen’s nostrils closed, closing off her only airway. Karen’s eyes flew open at this, and she tried to open her mouth wider to breathe in a little precious air around the huge dildo.

“Glub! Gug gug... whhhnnn...glub gug... wwhhhnnn!” she choked and wheezed, turning redder in the face. Cyndi Beth began to look worriedly at her and Renee, who wore a visage of maniacal glee.

“C’mon, you cunt! Swallow it down, you whore, or you’ll be doing everyone here all night till it’s coming out your ears!” Renee bellowed at her. But Karen could only keep trying to suck in air around the plastic penis filling her mouth and the entrance of her throat. Once again, Rick and the crew began to look at one another worriedly. Karen’s face turned a shade of reddish-purple before Renee finally relented and whipped the dildo out of her mouth disgustedly.

“You fucking bitch! You sorry sack of shit! You’re going to REALLY suffer for that!” Renee swore. With that, she gave a final squeeze of the bulb and shot a full half-cup of semen directly in Karen’s face, drenching her completely. She coughed and whooped for air, and in between sobbed in her misery.

“Save your tears, cunt! What I’ve got planned for you next will have you begging for this!” Renee raged. “My devils! If you’re through probing that bastard’s mouth, get over here! You’re going to lower this bitch so she can clean up the mess she made on the floor, with her tongue!”

To be continued...

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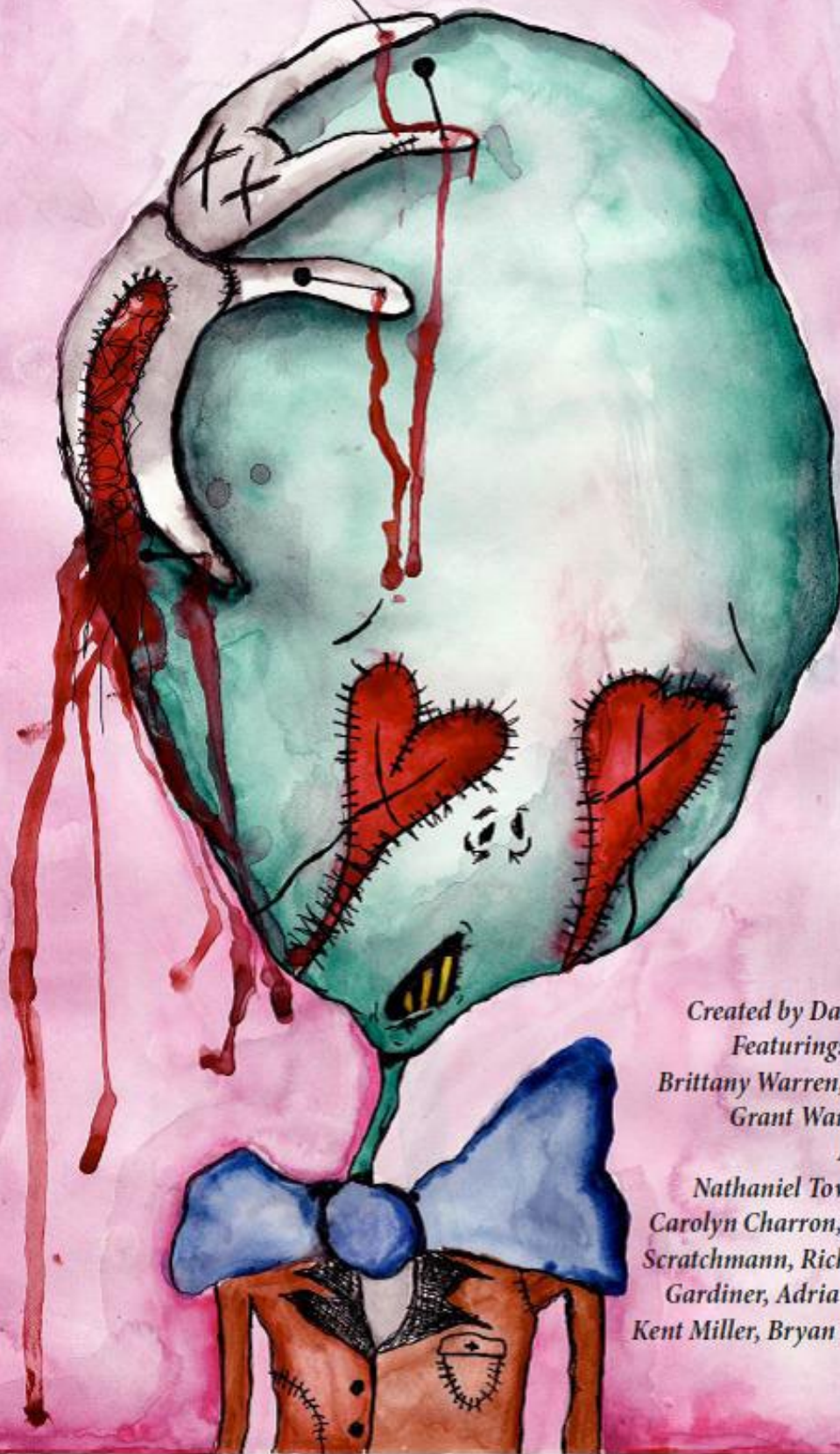
Stephen Burger is an independent artist and writer working out of Toronto, Canada. His first solo project, an anthology of short stories entitled "TALK!" is slated to be released in Spring 2013. For more information on TALK! as well as other examples of Stephen's work, please visit <http://www.stephenburger.com>

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